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RANCH ROMANCES

25c

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

THIRD SEPTEMBER NUMBER

FEATURING

FURY AT PAINTED ROCK
by Will Cook

SANDHILL MANHUNT
by Seven Anderton

RANCH FLICKER TALK
By The Famous Movie Star
ROBERT CUMMINGS

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30th Year
OF PUBLICATION

THIRD
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RANCH ROMANCES

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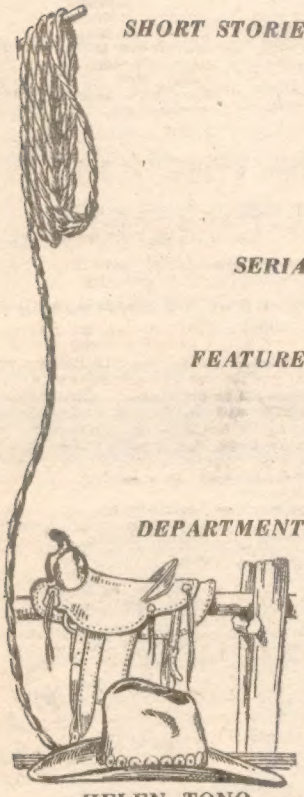

HELEN TONO
Editor

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Who's First?

Dear Editor:

Hello! Who will answer my call? All are welcome to write. Am a young woman and, people say, easy on the eyes. Like popular music, traveling, writing letters, some sports, craftwork and fancywork. Like collecting handkerchiefs, novelty tricks, earrings, small ornaments, bracelets and cushions. First to answer will receive a small snapshot. Who will be first? Hurry, hurry, hurry, and write.

M. ELLIOTT

699 Combie Street
Vancouver B.C. Canada

Lonely Cabbie

Dear Editor:

I write you in the hope that this will be printed. I hope to hear from many people and I promise to answer all letters. I like all kinds of Western music, and do some singing myself. Right now I work for a cab company.

WILLIAM STAGGS

General Delivery
Talladega, Alabama

Two From Vancouver

Dear Editor:

We live in Vancouver and would like to have some pen pals. Sharon is 5'4" tall, with rusty-colored hair and green eyes, and is 14. I am 5'5" tall, with light brown hair and brown eyes, and am 15. We are interested in swimming, horseback riding, skiing and tennis. So come on kids, get with the gab; we'd like to hear from you soon.

ROSALIE JACKSON

2564 Yale St.
Vancouver B.C. Canada

Likes Puzzles

Dear Editor:

I hope my first attempt at getting into Our Air Mail is successful. I have been reading RANCH ROMANCES for a long time, and enjoy the stories and the crossword puzzles. I have brown hair and brown eyes, stand 5'1½" tall, and weigh 98 lbs. I like all sports, and my hobbies are reading and corresponding. I will answer all letters received and will exchange snapshots. So come on boys and girls, let's try to fill my mail box.

BETTY CARVER

Box 226
Longhurst, North Carolina

Here Comes the Pony Express

Dear Editor:

We are three lonesome cowgirls from Texas.

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 28 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

This is our first try at roping some pen-pals. We would like to hear from both boys and girls, between the ages of 15 and 20. Our ages are: Ruthie Kattner 15, Jalenn Wade 16, and Tempie Stiles 15. Hurry and write us; we're waiting for the Pony Express to ride our way.

JALENN WADE

Box 194, Jarrell, Texas

RUTHIE KATTNER

Route 2, Georgetown, Texas

TEMPIE STILES

Box 152, Jarrell, Texas

Four of Them

Dear Editor:

We are four lonely G.I.'S stationed in the Northern Arctic circle of Alaska. We are all from large cities and are finding it difficult to adjust ourselves to this isolated outpost. The only entertainment at our disposal is our shortwave radio and the mail we receive. We'd like to correspond with women who understand our plight. We will answer all mail received, and swap pictures.

TOMMY FARLEY 4555385511
PETE LENOS 4555377209
CHUCK FLATT 4555385378
FRANKIE BURNS 4551201288

Batry A 867 AAA Br (AW) (SMBL)
APO 949 c/o P.M. Seattle, Wash.

Three Dear Johns

Dear Editor:

First of all we are very sincere in wanting to receive mail. We are three lonely G.I.'s who get very little mail, so please print our plea. Mail call is a very dull thing for us because we have all received "Dear John" letters, and we still have 10 months to do here in Korea. We are all 22 years old, and we all live in the state of Texas. Bill is 6'1", has black hair, brown eyes. Duane is 5'11", has brown hair and blue eyes, and I am

6'5", have blonde hair and green eyes. We all play on the 3rd Div. baseball team, and love all sports. Come on girls, write us lonely G.I.'s, please. Don't let us down.

SGT. BILL PLENDL US 55319107
SGT. ROBERT ADELINE US 55317655
SGT. DUANE COVEY US 12416918
HQ & HQ Co. 65 Regt. 3 Div.
APO 468 c/o P.M.
San Francisco, Calif.

An Englishman

Dear Editor:

I have been reading RANCH ROMANCES for a good many years. I am hoping that you can find space in your next issue to print my letter. My hobbies are stamp collecting, photography and writing. I have plenty of time to answer all letters. My age is 52. I was born in London, England, and am single.

LEONARD ZIETZ

Box 51
Mount Vernon, New York

Likes Activity

Dear Editor:

I would appreciate it if you would print my letter. This is my first try, and I sure hope I make it. I am 14, stand 5'3", and have brown hair and green eyes. My favorite sports are, swimming, basketball, baseball, tennis and wrestling. Occasionally I go hunting, skating and horseback riding. I promise to answer all letters, and I will exchange photos. Anyone from 13-113, please write.

DARLA LERUM

608 Madison Street
Austin, Minnesota

Working at 16

Dear Editor:

I'm just hoping there will be space enough for my letter in Our Air Mail. I'm a working girl of 16. I have brown hair (naturally curly), and blue eyes, and am not too bad-looking. I love hillbilly and western music, good mysteries, and RANCH ROMANCES of course. I'm the oldest of eight kids, so if there is anyone in this plight, please write. I prefer boys and girls from 15-25 so come on and fill my mail box.

BETTY WHITE

Box 46
Steward, Illinois

Feels Real Bad

Dear Editor:

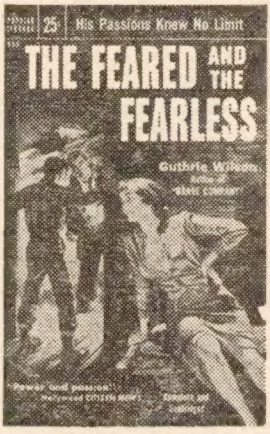
I am a very lonely girl of 17, who has brown hair and weighs 118. I stand 5'3". I promise to answer every letter I receive, so how about a little cheering-up.

MARIE SIMMONS

28911 Airway Street
Romeins, Michigan

She fled from WAR ...into a MURDER TRAP!

Maria sought escape in the powerful arms of Markham Faulkner, steel-nerved leader of the Italian Underground. But all her hopes were shattered when she realized — too late — she'd become the helpless pawn of Italy's most brutal killer.



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TRAIL DUST

PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found them. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

THE MAIL IS going through in Galveston, Texas, but the postman isn't too happy about it. A woman whose dog was frightening the postman away agreed to tie up the dog. She did, too —she tied it to the mailbox.

IN RIO LINDA, Calif., a husband refused a 90-day suspended sentence for chasing his wife out of the house with an ax. "I'd rather spend the next ninety days in jail than go home with that woman," he said. "It would be a vacation."

IT SEEMS THAT even racing pigeons famous for their cross-country flights are beginning to worry about flying conditions. One bird hopped into the weather bureau office window at a Los Angeles, Calif., airport, and glanced at the latest weather maps before taking off again.

THE OWNER of a restaurant in Prescott, Ariz., felt pretty sure that no one would ever take him up on the following offer: "Credit extended to those over 80 years and accompanied by their parents." Then a man of 82 and his father, 107, walked in. After he recovered from the shock, the restaurant owner paid for their meal.

A MAN IN Salt Lake City, Utah, found that it doesn't pay to do a good deed. He was walking down a street putting coins in all the overtime parking meters, when he was discovered by a policeman coming to write tickets for the traffic violators. The man was arrested for interfering with an officer in the discharge of his duty.

THEY DON'T believe in signs in Denver, Colo. On the gates of the arena where Colorado's forty-ninth annual all-breed dog show was held, there was a big sign which read: "No dogs allowed."

A BAKER IN YORK, Neb., won the door prize at a card party—one large cake.

THERE'S BEEN a lot of rain in Wichita Falls, Texas, lately. A wrecker was called to pull out a wrecker that got stuck in the mud while trying to pull out another wrecker that got stuck while trying to pull out a car that got stuck. All of them finally made it.

A SAN BERNARDINO, CALIF., man was asked to submit proof of his age when he applied for an old-age pension. He wrote to the Census Bureau, and was informed that he had been born in 1833. Again he wrote the bureau, tell- them that that was four years before his father was born, and they must have made an error. The Census Bureau didn't budge an inch; they wrote back to say that their records are accurate, and an error is out of the question.

RANCH
FLICKER TALK

by movie editor ROBERT CUMMINGS

This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

Outlaw Stallion

Horse-lovers and action fans will get a real treat in Columbia's exciting new Technicolor Western

PHIL CAREY'S pace is fast and furious these days, making Westerns for Columbia as fast as he can gallop. And still the studio can't keep his fans satisfied. Apparently seeing a Phil Carey movie whets their appetites for more—as soon as they've seen one, they want a second helping.

Right now he's appearing with Dorothy Patrick in *The Outlaw Stallion*, a real ripsnorter, filmed in Technicolor and full of action.

It shouldn't come as a surprise to you that this is a horse story. The equine hero is Kee-Kee, a magnificent white stallion. There's also an equine villain, a tough character with the misleading name of Amigo.

The action takes place in a wild horse preserve in a remote section of Utah, and Kee-Kee is the leader of the herds. There's a plot to kidnap Kee-Kee by a gang of horse runners, who figure that with the leader out of the way it will be easy to rustle the rest of the herd.

The gang decides to set a horse to catch a horse, and Amigo is their accomplice. They turn this savage fighter loose, knowing that he will battle Kee-Kee for domination over the herd. They expect him to win, and he has been trained to lure the wild herd to a trap.

The Outlaw Stallion is not entirely Kee-Kee's and Amigo's picture. Phil and Dorothy and an appealing youngster named Billy Gray are important, too. Dorothy plays a widow who lives on a ranch alone with her son, after her husband has been killed by a wild horse.

After that terrible experience Dorothy is naturally frightened by wild horses. But the boy, being a Westerner, is naturally crazy about wild horses—especially Kee-Kee. And Phil plays the local doctor, who encourages the boy, although he knows how his mother feels.

The rest of the story is better seen than talked about, especially a terrific fight between the two horses. Be prepared to hang on to your seat, tear up your handkerchief, or whatever you do when the excitement gets overpowering.

We'll let you in on a secret about that fight. The white horse in it isn't really Kee-Kee, but a stunt double. Kee-Kee is insured for $100,000, and the policy stipulates that if Kee-Kee gets hurt swimming, jumping or fighting all benefits are canceled.

The horse actually had *eight* doubles to take his chances for him. (Phil Carey, on the other hand, had no double and took all his chances for himself.) The studio make-up department really had its hands full. Every morning at 5 a. m. all nine horses reported to the studio for a silver rinse, which photographs white in Technicolor, and then were brought out to the location site in the Santa Susanna Mountains.

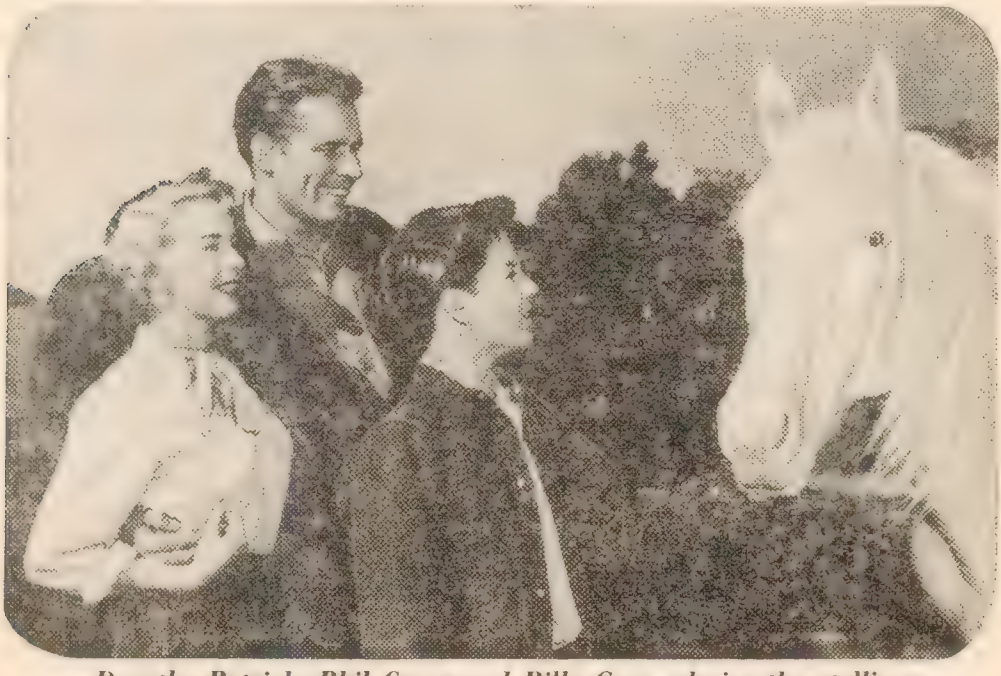
There was a crew of blacksmiths, too, to keep all the 150 horses in the cast well-shod. But no hammers rang against anvils, because the horses were shod in rubber, mostly to give them sure footing in the rocky terrain, and also to keep any sharp-eyed fan from noticing that supposedly wild horses had shoes on.

Phil told me that the horses were the prima donnas of the picture, and he and Dorothy felt like unimportant extras.

"Everyone was always running around with a curry comb, touching up Kee-Kee's mane, or smoothing down some other horse's tail," he laughed. "But if Dorothy and I had stepped in front of the cameras in the clothes we slept in, I don't think anyone would have noticed."

He told me that the funniest incident was the filming of the sequence where Kee-Kee is supposed to get caught in quicksand. Kee-Kee himself was never even considered for this episode, of course, and not one of the eight doubles would cooperate either. They refused to consider stepping into the sand pile, which, naturally, wasn't really quicksand.

Finally one of the horse trainers had a bright idea, and a few hours later arrived with a truckload of oatmeal (raw). This was mixed with the sand, and then the problem was keeping the scene down to one horse. They all wanted to get into the act!



Dorothy Patrick, Phil Carey and Billy Gray admire the stallion

SPENCER TRACY
Still Going Up

RANCH FLICKER TALK

IT'S USUALLY when you're at the bottom that there's nowhere to go but up. Spencer Tracy, though, has been at what looked like the top of the ladder for more than twenty years, and there still seems to be nowhere for him to go but up.

His career is a fabulous one, because he's never allowed himself to be typed. He came to Hollywood in 1931 to play murderers, gangsters and assorted riffraff, but nowadays (57 movies later) his fans are more likely to think of him as an old softie like *The Father of the Bride*.

He's a master at the light touch of romantic comedy, and he's a convincing and rugged he-man. One indication of his versatility is the two Oscars he won in a row—the first for the adventurous hero of *Captains Courageous* in 1938, the second for the thoughtful, kindly priest in *Boys' Town*.

Soon you'll be seeing the rugged side of Spencer in his newest movie, a Western called *Broken Lance*, produced by 20th Century-Fox. He really is an enthusiastic horseman. For years he was a polo player, and he still keeps his string of polo ponies on his Encino ranch.

"They're all put out to pasture now," he told me, "eating their heads off and leading a rich, full life. Sometimes when I watch them, I think maybe it's time I put myself out to pasture too."

But you can take it from me, Spencer never will. He's too full of energy ever to enjoy loafing. He sleeps less than four hours a night and gets to the studio so early he had to be given a key to let himself in.

His temperament is famous. He's sometimes friendly, sometimes distant; sometimes brusque, sometimes gentle; blue one moment and on top of the world the next.

His wife (who really *should* know him—they've been married 31 years) insists that he has an inferiority complex. "He really has no confidence in his talent," she said. "Not even two Oscars could convince him. If he were presented with a certificate of merit signed by every critic in the country, he'd figure some of them were wrong."

And yet there are hundreds of people in Hollywood who will tell you how Spencer has given them confidence in themselves. He's quick to praise the talent in others which he can never see in himself.

That's only one of the contradictions in his character—and there are plenty of others. He's vocally very scornful of superstitions, for instance, but he's never been seen walking under a ladder or lighting three on a match. And once he refused to sign a fat new contract because it was Friday, the 13th. (He turned up bright and early Monday morning, however, fountain pen in hand).

He often seems gruff when he meets people he admires, but it's only that he's determined to avoid apple-polishing. He ought to have more faith in complimenting big stars, because the only time he ever tried it, it worked.

Years ago, when he was a struggling young actor on Broadway, he met Ethel Barrymore. He worshipped her so much that he couldn't help telling her so. Then in her next play she offered him a part, and he almost didn't take it for fear she thought his compliments had had an ulterior motive.

As I said, it looks as though Spencer's on the top of the heap. Don't count on it though, because with every year he stays in Hollywood he seems to keep going up.

Spencer can play anything, from gangsters to softies

FURY at Painted Rock

by WILL COOK

HE ENTERED the town of Painted Rock at sundown, stabled his horse at Longmire's, then walked a half block south to the hotel. There he paused on the broad gallery to look back at the fifty-seven miles of burning desert he had just crossed.

Shouldering his bedroll and saddlebags, he entered the lobby, now flooded with glaring light as the last rays of the evening sun blared through the front windows, deepening the maroon rug, bouncing from the varnished, paneled walls.

At the desk he stopped and palmed a small handbell twice. In the rear of the building a woman's heels rapped on the hard floor, then a separating door opened and closed. She stood there, staring at him for a moment, reading him for what it was worth. Then she moved to the desk and spun the register around.

In a broad, angular hand, he signed his name: Owen

MARSHAL OWEN FRANK could not compromise with the law . . . even when it made him fight those he loved most

Frank, San Angelo, Texas, before laying a gold piece on the blotter.

"How have you been, Owen?" the girl said, and Frank's eyes came up quickly. But he could read nothing in her expression.

"Time hasn't changed you much, Joanne," he said. His voice sounded deep and somewhat rusty, as though he hadn't used it for some time; the sound of it was a surprise even to himself.

She lifted the gold piece, turning it over in her hand. "For a week?"

His shoulders rose and fell. "Time enough," he said and a faint smile turned up the ends of his lips. "I never stayed in one place long." She was tall, coming nearly to his eyes, and her hair was a pale gold, dangling in braids down her back. Her face was thin and her cheekbones prominent. To be beautiful, her lips would have had to be fuller, her chin less blunt, the large eyes not so widely spaced. But it was a pleasant face, for in spite of the lack of symmetry there was quality there, and a deep capacity for life that he understood well.

"You haven't changed," she said and he took the key she handed him. Shouldering his plunder he turned, meaning to ascend the stairs, but her voice reached out and held him, turning him to face her.

"Owen, when Will Savage told me that he sent for you, I hoped—" Something fatalistic moved into her eyes. "That was a silly thing. I've been hoping the same thing for four years."

"Neither of us want to change," he said and a frown made deep tracks across his forehead. "Does it matter any more?"

"Forget it," she said and he turned away. He felt her eyes on him as he mounted the stairs.

ON HIS face, burned to a walnut hue by years in the sun, was that studied gravity that comes to a man when he has had too much trouble and never enough happiness. Beneath his roll-brimmed hat were eyes a startling shade of blue with sharp splinters of light in them. His nose was straight and without a break, and his hair was tawny.

Moving deeper into the hall, his Mexican spurs rang against the bare floor. Beneath this sound the creak of his gun harness was faint, a muffled protest of dried leather.

Inserting his key, Owen Frank turned the lock and toed the door open and closed before depositing his blanket roll and saddlebags on a straight-backed chair. Glancing around the room he saw with one sweep of his eyes the hand-planed boards, the pine dresser with its cracked marble top, the brass bedstead in the far corner. A wash-faded towel hung limply by the commode. The wall by the head of the bed, as well as the window sill, was covered with jack-knife artistry, made by men like himself, lonely and a little afraid, and just passing through to another place equally as lonely.

Removing his coat, he rolled up his shirt sleeves, took off his string tie, and poured water from the pitcher into the porcelain bowl. After washing, he painstakingly brushed away all signs of travel from his clothes. He wore a dark suit and black tie. His clothes were old but in good repair.

Around his waist a shell belt drooped slightly, the once full loops showing vacancies, like a small boy who had lost his front teeth. On his right hip there rested a gun in a carved Mexican holster. Removing this, Owen Frank rocked open the loading gate, rotated the cylinder in a series of dry clicks, and spilled the blunt-nosed cartridges onto the marble-topped commode. After pulling the cylinder pin, he took a cleaning rod and rag from his saddlebag and spent a careful fifteen minutes erasing all sign of the desert dust.

Darkness crept into the room while he assembled the gun. He lighted the lamp and crossed to the window to look down at this town. He had been in a dozen like it in the past year, pausing for a time, then going on, yet the familiarity of Painted Rock was soothing. Four years was a long time for a man to be away—and again he wondered why he had gone. He worried a little about it, for this urge to keep on the move was like a hand at his back.

Splitting the town was a narrow ribbon

of loose dust, now a dull gray in the last fading light. Flanked on each side, blunt-faced buildings sat shoulder to shoulder, rising darkly against the blacker sky. To the west the desert spread its flatness, now barren and lifeless as night lowered a purple mantle. To the east giant bastions of rock rose in heights that seemed staggering, and past them the land dipped and rolled, lowering into green valleys.

On the street a group of ponies stood before the saloon, three-footed and half asleep. There was some traffic on the street, and to the north a splatter of lights showed another camp away from town. In the stillness of early evening he could hear the muted sounds of voices coming from it, a mingling of laughter and the movement of men.

TIED before the hardware store was a high-sided lumber wagon with a roll of wire fencing in the back. From beneath the overhang of the store a man emerged in big overalls, wearing a square-cut beard. He rolled another bound bundle of fencing to the tailgate and, with a mighty surge of muscle, hoisted it to the bed and closed the back of the wagon.

The doors of the saloon flapped idly as a heavy man came out, followed by two more. Light filtered through the slats of the door, glinting on the pearl-handled guns worn by the heavy man. Glancing down the street where the farmer loaded his fence, the man left the saloon, cutting diagonally across the street. He approached the farmer on an angle and, when he drew near, jabbed the man suddenly in the small of the back with his elbow.

The blow drove the bearded man against the wagon and the man with the guns walked on, disappearing from Owen Frank's view. On the saloon porch a group of cattlemen gathered, their laughter rippling along the street. The farmer limped to his wagon, mounted, with some difficulty, and drove out of town.

The rules never change, Frank thought. Turning away from the window, Owen Frank shrugged into his coat and went out, taking the stairs with a loose-muscled roll. Joanne Avery stood by the front window. She turned to him, giving him a sharp appraisal.

"Be careful, Owen. Burk Alvertone knows that you're here."

Frank's attention sharpened. "Did Will tell him?"

She shook her head. "He has a man waiting for you. Be careful."

He watched her face carefully and saw a door close in her mind, shutting him out. In her eyes there was pride and a stubborn will that he understood well. She would bend to no man, her eyes said, but around her lips he saw a contradiction that had always fascinated him.

"Can you stop this?" she asked suddenly.

"I get paid for it," he murmured. He placed his hands along the edge of the high desk and the badge pinned to the inside of his coat cuff struck the wood with a muffled ring.

For a quiet moment she studied him, a deep rooted concern in her eyes. "Owen, this is different. You know it's different."

He shook his head. "The law's always the same, Joanne. This is free land and there are no gods who can rule it."

"Burk Alvertone rules it," she said quickly. "He did when you left and he does now. Can you really buck him, Owen? Can you do it and ever live with yourself afterward?"

"I don't know yet," he said, and walked to the front door. Once on the gallery, Owen Frank hesitated and gave the street a more detailed inspection. To his left and south, a large feed store reared up on the corner of Riot and Buffalo Streets. Flanking it to the north was a small saddleshop, made of logs, like the rest of these buildings. The opera house sat on the far corner, with a hardware store cuddled against it. Farther down, an old livery stable rose in black shadows. The express shed and corral behind it were almost hidden from view.

On the porch of the saloon across the street, the group of cattlemen talked and laughed in loud voices. Owen Frank placed a deliberate attention on them, listening to their jumbled talk and feeling the tension run through the town.

VACATING the gallery, Owen Frank walked along the street to the far corner. The jail sat in the middle of this side street and he opened the front door without knocking.

The sheriff was behind his desk, cleaning a shotgun. He raised his head abruptly at this interruption. He stared at Frank for a moment, then his feet came off the desk and he said, "It's been a long time, Owen. I can't say that I'm glad."

"You sent for me," Frank murmured, and sat down in a straight-backed chair. He crossed his long legs and relaxed, a slight smile on his face. "Let's not batter each other around, Will. You don't like me and I don't like you, but there's a job to do. Let's get it done."

JOANNE

OWEN FRANK

REILY

"Sure," Will Savage said. "Burk's ruling the roost now. I can't handle him any more."

"And you think I can?"

"Why not?" Savage snapped. "No one knows him better than you do, Owen."

A troubled cast came to Owen Frank's cheeks, and he pursed his lips thoughtfully. Finally he said, "For a long time you've wanted to marry Joanne Avery, Will. That's been the root of our differences ever since I can remember. When the captain handed me this assignment I could smell your peculiar brand of handiwork. Is this your way of getting even with me, Will?"

Savage's face clouded and an open anger made a bright stain in his cheeks. He was a young man, near thirty, and his shoulders were heavy. He was a handsome man and knew it. Vacating his chair, he moved around the room restlessly for a moment. "I'm not denying that I never had any use for you, Owen. She loved you—she never got over you—but you went away and left her. I could hate you for that because I wanted her and you fixed it so that she would never have me."

"Never did I speak against you, Will." Frank's voice was soft and even.

"No," Will Savage said. "I guess not. You never had to. You just smiled at a woman and that was enough."

Savage came around to his desk and faced Owen Frank. "You want me to ad-

mit that I can't handle this mess—all right, I admit it! You want to rub my nose in it, then go ahead."

"I never wanted to do that, Will," said Frank. "Those people at the edge of town—they farmers?"

"About a hundred of 'em," Savage admitted. "There's a bust-up coming, Owen. Teepee grass is a big prize. There'll be men killed."

"There always is," Owen murmured and stood up. "I'll need help, Will. Can I count on you?"

"No," Savage said flatly. He touched Frank on the arm briefly. "You think I'll enjoy seeing you tree Burk? Well, I won't. He's not the same now, Owen. People are pushing against him and he has to fight or lose it all."

"He could hold some of it," Owen murmured, "and let the farmers have the rest."

Savage shook his head. "Burk means to keep what he has."

"Then I'll have to convince him otherwise," Frank said softly, and went out.

Walking back up the street, Owen Frank moved toward the saloon, now bright with squares of lamplight blooming from the windows. The cattlemen stopped talking when he drew near and he placed a deliberate glance on each of them, especially the man with the pearl-handled guns.

This man said, "What did you come back for, Owen? You forget something?" Behind him stood a young man, not much over twenty. On this man's face boldness was like a stain. He wore a gun tied against his thigh, and he smiled faintly at Owen Frank.

To the man with the pearl-handled guns, Frank said, "Sweikert, don't do anything to remind me." He nudged the batwings aside and went into the saloon.

BELLYING against the bar, Frank smiled, for he could read the signs as clear as newsprint. Sweikert and the young man had no stamp of hard work about them; their guns were their business. Frank glanced around the room, noticing the sparse trade, and formed an opinion in his own mind. A dozen men clustered around the tables against the wall, some drinking, others pretending to play cards. Watching them in the mirror, Owen Frank saw that they all looked him over carefully.

The bartender sidled up and Owen Frank said, "The good whisky, Felix."

"All my whisky is good," Felix said, and smiled. He was heavy and his hair was parted severely down the middle, well-oiled and slightly curling where it lay against his forehead. As he bent beneath the bar to get the bottle, he said, "You damned fool—get out of here!"

"I like it here," Frank said, and leaned against the cherrywood, a sudden weariness in his back and legs. He laid a quarter on the bar and tossed his drink off, cupping the empty glass in his big hands as the sudden warmth shot through him.

Through the back bar mirror, Frank studied again the men at the tables. Somehow these men seemed to be placing him in their minds, like a man remembers where he sets a chair or a half-empty bottle. Frank was a man who appeared to live on the thin edge of violence and men saw this, for he attached importance to the little things, the darted glance, the soft murmur of a man's voice in the darkness.

Felix remained at Frank's elbow and Frank said softly, "I hear they are out to get me."

"A jackass has more sense than you," Felix said hotly, but he was more worried than angry.

"The best way," Frank murmured, "for a man to find out who he's fighting is to stick his neck out and let them come out in the open."

"You can get it chopped off that way," Felix said flatly. "You know who you're fighting. The talk's going around that you won't stand by the farmers."

"I stand by the law," Frank said, and flipped his head around as the batwings banged open and a man pulled to a halt just inside. He was a short man, neatly dressed, but somehow the suit was ill fitting and he seemed self-conscious in it. The man stared at Owen Frank for a moment, then slapped the bar for service.

The man took his drink in one gulp, then

fastened his eyes on Owen Frank. His jaw had a bulldog cast to it, and he puffed out his cheeks until the ends of his thick mustache bristled. "Are you waiting for me?" the man asked.

"I don't know yet," Frank said. Down the street the rattle of the approaching stage was clear in the sudden quiet. Running a darting tongue over his lips, the man pointed to Owen Frank.

"There's a stage coming into town. Be on it."

"Not tonight," Frank said and felt the cool wind of danger blow against him. Across the street, brake blocks squealed and the coach teetered to a rocking halt before the Wells Fargo office. The conversation between driver and agent was low toned but discernible in this new quiet.

The man stepped away from the bar and half turned toward the door. "You're stupid," he said and whipped out a gun from a shoulder holster.

The bullet peeled wood from the bar top near Owen Frank's elbow and the room bulged with the sudden detonation. Then the man was in a plunging run, and Frank's shot splintered the wildly-whipping batwings, going home. The man let out a deep grunt and cascaded off the porch.

Making the door in two jumps, Owen Frank ducked out and to one side as the man fired again, this time from a propped-up position by the hitchrail. He was down and badly hurt, but determination gave him the strength to lift his gun.

Without hesitation, Owen Frank wiped his palm across the hammer twice, and the man was driven back into the dust. His tardy shot whined off the eave of a building, before power left him and he lay back unmoving.

ALONG the street, doors banged open and a crowd began to gather on the run. The saloon emptied in a minute, each man moving to what seemed to be a predetermined position.

Across the street, Sweikert and the young gunman detached themselves from the other Teepee riders and came over, the outflung shop lights reflecting from Sweikert's pearl-handled guns. Pausing to stare down at the dead man, Sweikert fanned his mustache away from his lip with the web between thumb and forefinger.

"You got the devil's luck," he said, and moved away.

The crowd was silent, listening, and from the far end of the street, a horseman paced slowly toward them. Sheriff Will Savage elbowed his way through the pack to stand by Owen Frank.

Raising his head, Frank watched the horseman approach. Burk Alvertone edged his horse against the crowd, forcing them to make way for him. He was an old man, rifle straight in the saddle, and his hair and mustache were white. He looked at the dead man with a detached, disdainful expression, then lifted his eyes to Owen Frank. "You haven't lost the touch, have you, Owen?"

"Your idea?" Frank asked.

Alvertone smiled and slipped a cigar in his mouth. The flare of the match outlined features that were lean and predatory; his eyes were a flat and chilly gray. "There was no harm done," he said. "Riordan wasn't too good, but he never would believe it."

Savage drew the old man's attention with a slight movement. "Get Teepee off the street before there's more trouble," he said.

Alvertone puffed on his cigar as though considering it. Finally he shrugged. "Why not, Will? In a week or so I won't have these sodbusters to worry about." He made a circular motion with his hand and Sweikert called to the Teepee men along the street. His heavy voice pushed at the crowd, driving them back. Across the street, the driver of the stage could wait no longer. He yelled to the span and rattled out of town, the sidelamps two bobbing cells of brightness holding back the night.

Turning, Frank pushed his way through, and went into the restaurant next to the hotel, taking a table against the back wall. He placed his hat on an empty chair and went slack-bodied, leaning on the oilcloth-covered table. The smell of food reminded him of his hunger and he ordered, waiting patiently until it was cooked and served. He sat hunched over, massaging his hands

with a nervousness he didn't bother to conceal.

The pattern of men's pride was an old picture to Owen Frank, for he possessed a good deal if it himself. A man could ride forever to forget that he had used a gun, but he could never ride far enough. For what he is and has been he carries with him to every new place.

The front door opened, and Burk Alvertone came in. The waitress shot the old man a nervous glance and went into the kitchen. Frank ate a little, then pushed the plate aside for his coffee. Alvertone paused by Frank's table and sat down.

"You're not mad at me, are you, boy?"

"What's got into you?" Frank asked. "Have you gone crazy?"

"You are mad at me," Alvertone said, and a sadness came into his face. "Owen, I don't like what I'm doing, but I have to—or I'll lose it all. When I came to this country I had to chase the buffalo off to build the house. You was just a little tyke, but you remember. We didn't walk off boundary lines, you and me. We just waved our hands at the hills and said that we'd take as far as we could see. You've been my only boy, Owen. Would you fight me?"

"The law will fight you," Frank said bleakly. "You think I can't remember? You think I can push it aside? There are things a man has to do because they're right. You're wrong, Burk. You have to see that."

"THIS time I'm committed," he said, "right or wrong. What does that badge mean to you, son? More than me?" He reached across the table and touched Owen Frank's hand. "Come in with me now Quit and let that fool Savage handle it the best he can. I need you, Owen, like I never needed you before."

"Miles Rankin still with you?"

"Yes," Alvertone said. "I know you and he never got on, but I'll fire him. I'll be over at the saloon in case you decide my way."

"You're wrong," Frank repeated. "Dead wrong. Don't make me come after you, Burk. Just don't make me do it."

Alvertone rose and smiled faintly. "That would be a big chore, even for you," he said, and went out. Frank stared after him until the old man went into the saloon, then finished his coffee. Placing a half dollar on the table, he took his hat and walked out, going immediately to the hotel.

He passed through the lobby quickly and went into his room. Joanne Avery raised her hand to him as he passed through, but he ignored her. When he closed the door of his room she went up the stairs, rapped on the panel, then waited for his answering footsteps.

He opened the door, looked at her, and turned away. She came into the room and closed it, leaning her back against it. "Riordan wasn't as good a shot as Burk thought, was he?" He turned his head quickly and stared at her. "I was watching from the front window. Burk is not the same, Owen. Can't you see it?"

"Maybe it's something I don't want to see," he murmured and sat down in a chair, his elbows resting on his knees. "I told him what I'd do. He ought to know me well enough to understand that I mean it."

"The gamble is too great now," she said. "He is on the edge of losing everything simply because he can't bear to part with any of his land. That's a shame in a way."

"Why did Will Savage send for me?" Frank asked. "He not only wanted a U.S. Marshal, he asked for me in particular."

"You'll have to ask him," Joanne said. "He asked me to marry him, Owen." She studied him for his reaction.

Raising his head, Owen Frank looked at her boldly for a moment. She stood quietly, her back against the wall. A tall girl, she seemed actually skinny with the lamplight on her. Behind her the long shadow reached to the ceiling. In her flowing dress her hips were slender, only faintly flaring, and she seemed to have no waist at all. Her bare arms, now crossed over her small breasts, were slender but suggestive of strength.

His eyes lingered on her face, and in her eyes he read her pride and a will that, like his own, knew no bending. She was a woman who would have what she wanted,

but in the soft curve of her lips he read something else. A promise, perhaps, of a gentleness that she had yet to show a man. This was the contradictory thing about her that always pulled at him.

"Are you going to marry him?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said seriously. "I've given up on you, Owen. A woman needs more than hope that a man will change."

He said nothing and began to roll a cigarette. She turned away from him for a moment and he raised his eyes to her, following the graceful flare of her dress over her hips.

Turning back, she surprised him in his appraisal, and her eyes held a faint amusement. "Sorry," he said and studied his half-smoked cigarette. He took one last puff on the biting smoke and rose to throw it into the pot-bellied stove.

He hunkered down in his chair again, and even then the picture of her was clear in his mind—a tall girl with hair the color of spun gold. Now that he was with her he felt relaxed and full of comfort, and he wondered about this. To a man who was rarely surprised at anything, the sudden realization that he had never stopped loving her was disconcerting, and he stiffened his face to keep this emotion from showing.

WHEN he raised his glance again, he found her leaning back against a table, studying him gravely. Her hands were behind her and her hair lay loose and shining over her shoulders.

"You always were a deeply troubled man, Owen. I never understood what made you so restless."

"Some people are like that," he said, and got up to stand by the stove. He stared at the fire through the draft slots, the flames casting dancing patterns on his angular face. "A man is what he is, Joanne. People don't change much."

"I know," she said. "I want you to stay, Owen, simply because you're tired of riding over hills. But you won't do that. You'll stay until there's no more challenge, and then you'll leave." She looked at him seriously, "Why does it have to be that way?"

"What's wrong with moving around?"

"I couldn't live like that—without roots. My life would have to be so that I could look out the window and see my man working, and know he'd come home every night."

He spoke gently. "You knew what I was thinking when I looked at you a moment ago, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"You're not offended?"

"No," she said frankly. "A man measures a woman differently because some things seem more important to him than others." She gave him a wistful smile. "Marrying you would be exciting, Owen—perhaps even dangerous—for there would be no security, no assurance that tomorrow would dawn in peace. Would it be worth that risk?"

"That's where your values come in," he said, and touched her lightly. She didn't protest and he slid an arm around her slim shoulders, pulling her gently toward him. She offered no resistance, leaning against him as though it were a welcome relief.

Putting his hand beneath her chin, he tilted her face. Then her arms encircled his neck and he was kissing her. He had meant it to be a gentle kiss, soft to show his love and cool to prove that he was not all demanding, but the soft wetness broke through his reserve and he grew rough.

The contradictory expression around her lips that he had always noticed was not, he discovered, his imagination, for in the fire of her kiss she offered him a life that was full and complete. It was like diving into a bottomless pool—down, without end or the desire for it to end. He released her reluctantly and she touched him on the chest in a final caress before moving away.

Taking out his tobacco again, he found that his hands shook slightly when he tried to form a cigarette. Finally he said, "That wasn't very wise, was it?"

"Not very," she agreed in an unsteady voice. "It brings back too many things that we'd both be better off if we forgot. We could never make a go of it, Owen. We're fools even to think of it."

"Fools live short, happy lives," he said. "You wouldn't like that?"

"My roots have to be down deep," she said. "I want my house built on rocks."

"Like those farmers at the grove?"

"Not like them," she said, "But wanting the same things they want." She turned around and took his arm. "I guess we both want something we can't have."

"We can have it," he told her, "but would we be satisfied afterward? When this is settled I'll leave and you'll forget about me. You'll marry Will Savage and be happy. That's the way life goes."

"Does it?" She laughed shortly and moved over to the window, parting the curtains to look down at the street. "We're lying, Owen. Neither of us is going to forget. Maybe you'll find a woman for you—one who'll be happy to move when the weather changes. You'll be happy, and I'll hate her for making you happy when I couldn't."

He remained motionless, and then she turned away from the window, moving past him to the door. She opened it, hesitated, but didn't turn around again.

"Goodnight, Joanne," he said.

"Goodnight," she said softly and closed the door. He listened until the sound of her heels died out, then blew out the lamp and went back to the street.

ON THE porch, the young gunman waited while a young woman stood in the deeper shadows. They had been talking softly and intently until Owen came out; then their talk died. The young man stepped across a bar of light flung from the front window. Glancing past him, Owen could barely distinguish the girl's features in the shadows. Her hair was dark, framing an oval face, and the coarse dress identified her as a homesteader.

The young man spoke again to the girl, softly. "Better go back, Lottie." His voice contained many things, and Owen's attention sharpened.

The girl shook her head and shrank against the wall where the night was thickest. The young man shrugged and shook out a sack of Duke's Mixture, rolling a cigarette.

"I'm Reily," he said. "Burk wants to see you right away." He raked a match against the hotel wall. "I'll take you over to him, friend."

"I don't lead worth a damn," Frank said flatly. "I'll come over when I get ready—if I get ready."

In the darkness Reily's teeth glistened as his smile widened. Drawing on his smoke, the red end glowed and faded till finally he spun it into the dust. Watching him, Frank could see the brash pride in the man's eyes. Here was a challenge, and Reily was the kind who couldn't put one aside. Frank understood the rules, for it was a game he had played before. It never varied, and he was almost pleased when Reily took the bait.

"Burk said 'now'," Reily repeated in the softest of voices. "I like to try a tough man, Frank." He laughed. "I'm not like Riordan."

"You don't want to play by my rules," Frank murmured. "Move on now before you buy yourself some trouble."

"When *I'm* ready," Reily said. "I don't shove either."

"Oh, please," Lottie said in a frightened voice, moving out of the shadows.

Suddenly his feet lifted and he flew over the rail

"Go back to the grove," Reily said, but didn't look at her. She remained rooted along the wall and the young man added, "One of us is going to give, friend."

"All right," Owen Frank said, and without warning his hand darted out, fastening in the folds of Reily's shirt. Cloth ripped sharply as Frank yanked the lighter man, nearly jerking him off his feet. Instantly, Reily's hand flashed for his gun. But Frank was ahead of him, batting the hand away and ripping the Colt free of the holster. He threw the gun and shoved Reily backward at the same time. The Colt popped in the dusty street. Reily went into the porch rail, his feet flying out and up as he grabbed frantically for the upright to regain his balance.

This saved him from falling, and he pulled himself erect, no longer smiling. His

shirt hung in tatters over his belt, with the collar and one sleeve holding it on.

Standing there, Owen Frank waited with a drawn-out patience. Finally Reily shrugged and moved around the tall man, going off the porch. He hesitated by his gun as though pondering the wisdom of retrieving it, then scooped it up and continued on across the street without a backward glance.

Turning to Lottie Meechum Frank asked, "Is he your man?"

"I—I don't know." She stepped into the light and Frank studied her, his eyes sharp as drill ends. Her lips were full, he saw, and the plain dress accentuated rather than concealed her shapeliness. He could understand why Reily would be attracted to her, for she was a woman to stir a man's thoughts until he had to tip his hand or go away wondering. It was natural that men would watch her, and the man who married her would have to understand this and put up with it.

HER lashes were long and her dark eyes somehow compelling. Her animated face would express her moods and thoughts. These things she could not help, but Owen Frank wondered if it were to her advantage. Winning a man would be easy for her, much easier than it would be for Joanne Avery. But where did the real worth lie—in this woman with the obvious love of life in her eyes, or in the quiet one who hid herself behind a calm exterior?

"You're a farmer and he's a cattleman," Frank said. "Did you ever stop to think of what would happen if either side found out about you and him?"

"We'll run away together," she said quickly. "He's not like you think. He's good!"

"Where can you run that you wouldn't remember?" Frank asked. "You'd better get back to the grove before you're missed."

She turned then and lifted her skirts, scurrying off the porch and down the dusty street. Owen Frank watched her for a minute, then shifted his glance to find Reily standing on the saloon porch, his head turned to follow Lottie down the darkened street.

When she passed the stable at the end of the street, Reily turned and went into the saloon, the batwings flapping idly after his passage.

Leaving the porch, Frank's boots made small bombs of dust as he crossed the street. Shoving the swinging doors aside, he crossed to the bar and ordered a beer. Felix worked the tap and slid a schooner before Frank, then began polishing a spot by the tall Texan's elbow. Frank looked at him, and the saloonkeeper's eyes darted to the back table where Alvertone, Sweikert and Reily sat.

Owen Frank studied Sweikert through the back bar mirror. There was not much about Sweikert that he didn't know or couldn't remember. Sweikert wore a cartridge belt with left and right hand holsters, both guns carried to the front of his thighs. The tiedowns wrapped twice around his legs before being knotted.

Finishing his beer, he pushed the glass aside and crossed the room, moving around the empty tables until he flanked the one occupied by Burk Alvertone and his men.

Frank glanced at Reily, but the young man was studying a spot on the green velvet where someone had set a whiskey glass down and left a circular stain.

"You think it over yet, Owen?" Alvertone asked.

"I've thought it over," Frank confessed. "I don't want it, Burk. Call it off before someone gets hurt. I've got to play by the rules—you can see that, can't you?"

"All I can see is that I'm going to lose my shirt if I don't fight," Alvertone snapped. He took his cigar from his mouth and sat absolutely motionless, the smoke smoldering and forgotten between his fingers. Reily stopped staring at the stain, his eyes coming up to Frank's face. "Don't make me go against you," Alvertone said. "Owen, I'm giving you fair warning."

"That's no good," Frank murmured. "Burk, you aren't the law, and you don't give orders away from Teepee grass. Better remember that."

"Big talk," Sweikert said softly, and placed his hands flat on the table. "You always made big talk."

Frank turned his head and looked at the man. "Careful now," he murmured. "I never was impressed with you."

Alvertone's hand came out and fastened on Sweikert's wrist. "Cool off," he said, and Sweikert relaxed. Glancing at Owen Frank, he added, "Will Savage took a lot on himself by sending for you, Owen. Get out of the country, but don't wait until morning. Do it tonight."

"I'll leave when I'm ready," Frank said, and walked out.

FOR several minutes Burk Alvertone stared at the door, his fingers drumming the table. To Sweikert he said, "Take care of this hardhead, but make it look good. You stay here with me, Reily."

"I know how," Sweikert said, and pushed back his chair," Sweikert said, and pushed strides. Alvertone sat quietly, gnawing on his cigar.

For a moment Reily just looked at the old man, then said, "Owen was the only son you had. What's inside you, old man?"

"Regret," Alvertone admitted. "A man fights like hell to build something, then the time comes when he has to part with it, and he can't. He's got too much tied up in it, even more than his liking for someone."

"This has a smell to it I don't like," Reily murmured, and locked eyes with Alvertone. "It's more than a man can stomach."

"Then get out!" Reily started to rise, but Alvertone added, "After Sweikert is done. Just stay in that chair, boy."

Owen Frank was waiting by the darkened maw of the hardware store when Sweikert came of the saloon to teeter on the edge of the porch. There was something in the man's stance that held Owen Frank motionless, for in the slow movement of Sweikert's head was the predatory keening of a wolf after prey. Light spilled from the doorway behind him, outlining him clearly. Fragments of it sparkled on the pearl-handled guns. Then he saw Owen Frank, and the keening stopped.

Sweikert stepped down to the street level and waited.

The movement was like a shouted warning. Owen Frank moved a few steps along the walk until he again fronted the hotel. Shifting a little, Sweikert stepped under the hitchrail toward the center of the dusty street, and Frank crossed over.

Men appeared along the street, waiting in silence with a studied patience. Moving along the walk, Frank stopped on the saloon side of the hitchrail, letting the horizontal bar lie between them.

On Sweikert's face there was no clue to his temper; only his eyes were alive and watchful.

"You've been waiting years," Frank said easily. "You don't have to wait any longer, do you?"

Laughing softly, Sweikert hooked a thumb in his shell belt. Across from them, the hotel door stood open, shafting yellow lamplight onto the dust. Joanne Avery stepped out on the porch, lifting her face to feel the cool night air. She saw Frank and the gunman immediately, and read the full purpose of it.

Sweikert saw Frank's eyes flick across the street and he turned his head slowly, keeping his eyes on Frank until the last moment, then swinging away for a brief look before darting back.

"She's pretty," he said in a low voice. "But too skinny. I guess she'd marry Savage if you weren't around, wouldn't she?"

Half of the men on the street were farmers. They moved around until they were lining the walk solidly on the other side of the street. Sweikert turned his head and favored them with a brief glance. "Frank, I always wanted to squeeze you until you yelped. Looks like I have my chance, doesn't it?"

"You're not squeezing me," Frank murmured. "I don't bluff any better now than I did four years ago."

Sweikert laughed, a soft rumble in his throat. He raised his hand and brushed his mustache. Owen Frank uncoiled, seizing the man's wrist and jerking the arm straight out.

With Sweikert on the other side of the hitchrail, Frank twisted until the elbow joint was locked, then ducked under the bar, hauling the gunman's arm with him.

Sweikert cried out when the bar caught him in the back of the arm muscle. Suddenly his feet lifted and he flew over the rail, to land face down in the dust on the other side.

In one leap Owen Frank was over the rail, landing with both feet in the small of Sweikert's back. The man shrieked, and then Frank jerked the man's pearl-handled guns free of the holsters and sailed them blindly away from him, hearing them hit the boardwalk on the other side.

WHEN Frank came erect he had Sweikert with him, bending him against the hitchrail to drive an axing fist flush in the man's face. Sweikert was without strength and made no attempt to defend himself. Methodically Owen Frank hammered him in the face, the dull, pulpy sound carrying along the street like a rock thrown into a quiet pool.

When he finished Frank stepped back, releasing the pressure against Sweikert's arched back. The man whipped forward like a freed spring and fell unmoving in the dust.

With a fine temper whipping through him, Owen Frank stepped into the saloon. At the rear table Burk Alvertone still sat with his cigar, now reduced to a sour stub. Reily got up from the table and leaned against the wall.

Looking at the young man, Frank asked, "How is it going to be, Reily?"

"I'm out of it," Reily said. "That was the big gun out on the street."

Alvertone stared at Owen Frank for a nervous minute and then reached up to unbutton his coat.

"Pull it," Frank advised, "and I'll forget who you are, Burk. You sent a man after me and that was all right, because I'll come after you if I have to. But don't make me kill you."

The look on Alvertone's face changed to worry as Frank pressed his thighs against the edge of the table. "Sweikert's out front," Frank said, "only he doesn't know it right now."

"Dead?" Alvertone was almost afraid to ask.

Frank shook his head and his lips pulled flat and tight against his teeth. "Burk, when I got my assignment I didn't want it. My first thought was to turn in my badge, but that was no good. If an officer of the law starts making exceptions for the people he's fond of, then there soon won't be any law. You're riding the white horse, Burk, and it's high time you came off and walked with the rest of the common people."

For a second neither moved. Then Alvertone made a desperate attempt to rise, but Frank surged against the table, driving the man into the corner and spilling the table on top of him.

Under his coat Alvertone carried a short-barreled gun, and he tried to get at it. The tangle of upended table and splintered chair hindered him. Sweeping away the litter with a brisk shove, Frank grabbed Alvertone by the coat front and pulled him erect.

As the man came forward, Frank snapped his head back with a stinging slap across the mouth.

By the wall Reily waited, his hands outstretched and flat against the paneling. He made no move to assist Alvertone.

The gun Alvertone groped for came clear of his coat and he tried to swing it around toward Frank, but Reily left the wall in a lunge, kicked out, and the gun whirled from Alvertone's hand. It thudded against the far wall, struck on the hammer, and went off, bouncing on the sawdust covered floor from the recoil.

The bullet puckered the ceiling and the sudden report rang in the room like the stroke of a gong.

Without hesitation, Owen Frank raised his knee into the man's groin, and Alvertone forgot about the gun. A sickly pallor spread over his cheeks and his eyes turned glassy like a dog's in pain. His shirt was torn and his hat fell off, rolling on the floor like a loose wheel, following an increasingly smaller circle before stopping.

Frank hit him again, this time with his doubled fist, and Alvertone's hair fluffed up in the back from the impact. Kicking free of the debris around his feet, Frank yanked the man from the corner and propelled him toward the door.

USING Alvertone's head as a battering ram, Frank knocked the swinging doors aside. Alvertone was still conscious and bellowing when Owen Frank stopped suddenly at the porch edge and gave him a lifting shove that cascaded him into the hitchrail. It splintered under the impact, and he was cast into the dust by Sweikert.

Owen Frank stood there, his legs spread, swaying like a tall tree in a whipping wind. The farmers and townspeople left the walk and began to crowd into the street, forming a ring around the downed men. Frank left the porch and roughed his way through the crowd, stopping when he gained the hotel porch.

Alvertone was struggling to his feet. His face was bleeding badly and his clothes

were torn and fouled with dust. At the moment he looked like a dirty old man who had spent the night in the gutter because he didn't know any better. Almost blindly Alvertone stumbled toward his horse, mounted on the second try, and rode from town.

Moving closer to Frank, Joanne Avery studied him, trying to read his expression in the lamplight flooding the open doorway. The planes of his face were set and unmoving. Only in his eyes could she read what he felt. She saw regret there, and pity, for deep within this man the capacity for gentleness was stronger than violence.

At the far corner, Will Savage left his office and hurried along the darkened street toward them. Across the street, Sweikert was having a hard time of it, for Frank's fists had closed both his eyes. Groping for a moment, Sweikert came to a portion of the hitchrack that was still standing, then stumbled and fell heavily, rapping his head solidly against the post.

A ripple of laughter went up from the farmers, swelling until it reached a full-bellied roar. Watching Owen Frank, Joanne saw an outraged sympathy come into his face, but he made no move to leave the hotel porch.

Savage came on, his feet thumping the boardwalk. Spotting Owen Frank, he stopped and said, "Whatever Burk has done, he raised you. If I were him I'd put a bullet in you for this, Frank. What the hell kind of a man are you to turn on a man like Burk? Tell me that!"

"Get out of here," Frank said softly, and swayed toward Savage.

The man took an involuntary backward step before checking himself. Looking at Joanne, he saw no sympathy on her face. This stung him for, like most proud men, he was eager to blame the other man for his own weakness.

"You always were crazy tough," Savage said. "But you've gone too far now. You're a disgrace to the badge you wear."

"Get out of here," Frank repeated, and put a hand against the sheriff's chest, shoving gently.

Standing where Frank had shoved him, Savage tried to whip up his resentment to the point of action, but somehow he couldn't quite carry it off. Reily had come to the saloon porch and now stood along the wall.

Eight of the farmers mounted the porch and surrounded him. Suddenly there was a lunging of bodies, and Reily was disarmed and seized by rough hands. A cry for tar and feathers went up, and a dozen voices pushed it along.

Without glancing at Savage, Frank left the hotel porch and ran across the street, battering his way through the milling throng until he was next to Reily. "Let him go!" he shouted, and the calling died out abruptly. "I said, let him go," Frank repeated in a softer voice, and everyone heard it.

One by one they complied, all but one man with a thick beard and stubborn eyes. "Damned if I will," he said. "We'll take care of this."

"Not tonight," Frank said, and hit him, sending him cascading into the arms of his friends. A resentful growl went up, a surging of quick tempers, but Frank stared at each of them, his face cool and unruffled. "Get something straight," he said. "You can't wipe your own noses. If you could, you'd have land by now and a cabin started. Go on back to the grove. The law will handle this."

THE blast of his words turned them, one at a time, but soon the tide began to break and there was no stopping it. Soon they were all walking toward the edge of town. Straightening his torn clothes, Reily said, "Thanks, Owen. That puts us even, doesn't it?"

"Even, but not finished," Frank said. "You're through with Burk. You were through when you kicked the gun out of his hand."

"That's for sure," Reily said, and rolled a cigarette. "You think those plow pushers will trust me now?"

"You thinking of the girl?"

The young man shrugged. He drew deeply on his cigarette and shied it into the street, where it hit with a scattering of sparks. "I'd like to throw in with you, Owen. It's my only chance now."

"I'm a poor risk, after tonight," Frank said.

"You sure planted a flag." He watched Frank, turning with him when the tall man moved toward the hotel. Will Savage had gone on down the street, but Joanne Avery was still waiting on the porch.

"You can be a hard man, Owen," she said, then she smiled and her reserve broke, revealing her warmth. "Come inside, both of you. I'll fix you something to eat."

In the back room of the hotel, Joanne Avery fried a platter of ham and eggs while Owen Frank and Reily relaxed at the kitchen table. A large wall clock ticked noisily, and when Frank glanced at it he found it was nearly ten o'clock.

Placing the platter on the table, Joanne took a chair across from them and leaned on her folded arms. When they finished, she got up to get the coffee.

Giving Reily a close scrutiny, she asked, "What happened to you, Reily?"

He raised his head and looked at her. "Nothing, why?"

"Do you think you can go back to Teepee now?"

"I guess not," he said. "I was getting tired of it anyway."

Her eyebrows ascended slightly. "Tired of seventy dollars a month and no work?"

"Maybe," Reily said defensively, sounding as if he wished someone would change the subject. He patted his pocket absently and stood up. "Out of tobacco," he murmured, and left hurriedly.

For a moment Joanne said nothing. Then, "He rolled a cigarette just before he came across the street with you, Owen."

"Let it go," Frank said, and smiled at her. "Reily has a girl, and she's a farmer. Just stand back and let him make the jump himself."

She nodded and fell silent, regarding him intently. Finally she said, "I watched your face tonight, Owen. You hated to do that to Burk, didn't you?"

"Yes," he said. "But he leaves a man no choice. He's always ruled with a clenched fist. The habit's strong in him, but this time he's wrong."

"I was sorry to see it come to a head tonight," she murmured. "It marks the beginning or the end of a lot of things, doesn't it?"

"The beginning happened a long time ago, and the end of this won't come until men agree that it is to end. You take two kids fighting in the street. One has a black eye and a bloody nose, while the other has a split lip. Someone comes along and pulls them apart and tells 'em to quit fighting. If they both agree, it ends there, but if they don't, they'll take it up again in the alley. When Burk's finished, he'll have to admit it. The same goes for the farmers. They'll have to learn to pass a Teepee man on the street without remembering the trouble that's been."

SHE nodded. "You cut to the heart of everything, don't you? You always did that, Owen. Burk has hurt the farmers

already. Two men were killed. How can you stop people from thinking about the ones who have been hurt?"

"Probably can't," he said. "The ones who can't forget will have to go."

"I see," she murmured, and folded and unfolded her hands. "You don't trust Burk any more, do you?"

"No," he admitted. "I know him, and I know what he's fighting. If Will Savage had done his job in the first place this wouldn't be happening at all."

"Why blame Will? Can he help it if he's weak?"

"I guess not," Owen murmured. "It's too easy for another man to pick apart the mistakes already made. Coming back here like this wasn't what I wanted, but the badge has to be served." He got up from the table and went around to her, placing his hands gently on her shoulders. "I've been over a lot of hills, Joanne. It wasn't bucking the man who raised me that made me afraid to come back. It was the thought of seeing you again."

She turned her head, tipping it to look at him. "Oh?" She held his eyes for a minute, then turned away. "I didn't cry much after you left, Owen. Does it hurt to know that?"

"No," he said, "But I've heard that crying is the story of a woman's life."

"Not my life!"

"No," he agreed, "not yours. Your life would have to be full. Not very sedate, I'm afraid, because there's too much living in you, Joanne. Too much love to waste on tears. You remind me of the solitary eye in a fire in the middle of a long night, where the wind is blowing cool out of the west and the land is unbroken for miles around. A man travels a path for a long time, making pictures in his head, and he'll cover a lot of ground trying to find things that fit those pictures. But they're like gold, often hunted and rarely found. So a man tells himself that the fun is in the hunting, only it isn't so. When I left here all I had was pictures, but I don't need them any more. Not now I don't."

Placing her hands flat on the table, she held herself completely motionless, then rose quickly and came against him. She put her arms around him tightly and stood that way for a time. She spoke quietly. "What changed you, Owen?"

"Nothing's changed," he murmured and she moved away from him to lift her head and look at him.

"Everything is the same, Joanne. Isn't loving a man enough, Joanne? Does it have to be your way?"

"Maybe love is enough," she said, "for now, but what of ten years from now when you watch the grass turn green and your feet begin to itch? You'd hate me, Owen, because I'd be tying you down when you wanted to move on." She moved away from his arms and turned her back to him. "You're a real fiddlefoot, Owen. You've got the monkey on your back and you'll never get it off. Sometimes I wish you were running from a man instead—oh, what's the use? We said the same things four years ago and it didn't stop you then. You ask me if I love you enough to live your way. Do you love me enough to live mine? Isn't that fair?"

"Who can say what's fair?" he murmured. "I've never gotten you out of my mind, Joanne."

"It would be better for both of us if we could," Joanne said flatly. "Love twists a woman all up inside until her dreams are lies and tomorrow is just a hazy spot over the horizon. I know you, Owen. You won't stay this time. Even when your arms are around me, you're far away from me and I can't reach you to pull you back."

"I love you," Owen said softly. "Isn't that enough?"

"No," she said. "We have to want the same things, and we don't."

"I guess there isn't much more to say, then," he said, and moved toward the door. He paused there and watched her, but she had her back to him and wouldn't turn around.

"Is this goodbye, Joanne?"

"It was goodbye before," she said quickly. "I have no hold on you, Owen. I've wanted one, but I never could make it."

"I don't like to go like this," he said urgently.

"WHAT other way is there? How can you hurt people easily?" She whirled around to face him. "You'll fight Burk because you have to, because it's something you've weighed in your mind and told yourself is right. When you're finished, the farmers will have their land, and I'll have nothing. You'll be gone."

"Come with me," he urged. "Joanne, we'll find some place to settle. I'll make you happy."

"There's nothing wrong with settling here," she insisted. "All right, I may be making a large point out of a small one, but I believe that a man should be happy wherever he is. Is that so wrong?"

"There are no arguments for either of us," he said. "That's been our trouble, Joanne. Neither of us have ever really wanted to surrender to the other." He opened the door and went into the lobby. At the head of the stairs he paused to look back, but she was still in the kitchen.

Closing the door to his room, he lighted a small lamp. Sitting on the edge of his bed he removed his boots and socks, then stripped off his coat and shirt. Pouring water into the bowl, he washed to the waist, then blew out the lamp.

He hung his gun over the corner post of the bed and removed his pants, settling down for the night. Lying on his side a while, he rolled over on his back and laced his hands behind his head.

The memory of Joanne's lips was strong, and he could still feel the supple length of her strained against him. What she had offered him she had never offered before to any man, and yet it had not been enough to quench his restlessness.

Accepting would have been easy, for he was young and time was still relative to him—a month or a year made little difference. But what of when he grew older? Would he regret the things he could have seen and done? He suspected that her judgment was right.

There was no doubt in his mind how his life would end. Some day along the trail he would grow weary and stop—he was positive of that—but right now he had to keep moving. A man couldn't help the way he felt about things. He had to take life as it was offered and be happy with it.

Only he wasn't happy and he knew it.

A sharp rapping on his door caused him to sit bolt upright. A hurried glance at his pocket watch showed the time to be near midnight. The pounding grew more insistent, and he pulled on his pants hurriedly. "I'm coming," he said. "Keep your shirt tail in."

When he opened the door Joanne Avery placed her hands against his bare chest and shoved him back slightly. "Owen, Will Savage just came into town. He rode out to see Burk to try to smooth this over, but he didn't get a chance. Burk was gathering his men and Will thinks Teepee is going to raid the grove!"

Frank cursed softly and began to put on his shirt. "Light a lamp," he said and sat down to tug on his boots. "Where's Reily?"

"At the grove," Joanne said quickly. "Owen, you've got to stop Burk!"

"That's what I get paid for," he said. "Where the hell is Savage now?"

"Downstairs, waiting for you," she said, and kneaded her hands.

"He's a fool," Frank said, and buckled on his gunbelt. He went out without hat or coat, hurrying down the stairs. Savage was waiting in the lobby, pacing up and down like a nervous animal.

"I wouldn't blame you if you refused to help me," Savage said.

"You talk like a jackass," Frank said, and was out the door before the sheriff got into motion.

THE street was dark at this hour, only a few night lamps in the shops cast a dim light on the boardwalk as they ran toward the end of the street, Owen Frank in the lead. There was no sound at all in the sleeping town other than the pound of their boots on the wooden walk.

As they drew near the wagon road leading into the grove, Frank said, "How much time have we got?"

"Fifteen minutes—who knows?"

They stumbled along in the darkness.

A hushed gloom lay over the wagon camp, for the fires had died down to glowing coals. As they came near, Frank drew his gun and shot twice in the air. Immediately he was answered by frightened calls from the various wagons.

"Build up your fires!" Frank called, and veered toward a farmer who jumped down dressed in a long flannel night shirt and waving a double-barreled shotgun.

"Don't come any closer!" the farmer shouted, and pointed the gun.

"You fool—Alvertone's riding on you to raid your camp!" Frank's words seemed to set the camp alive.

Savage began to heap brush on a fire. As the feeble flame took hold and grew, it threw out an ever-widening circle of light. Other men began to rebuild the fires and soon it was possible to see across the compound.

They were none too quick, for out on the flats they could hear the growing thunder of running horses. Savage was dashing back and forth, shouting orders and getting the men into position to defend the grove. As Owen Frank watched them he realized that, if anyone started shooting, the farmers would be beaten before they got started. All the cattlemen wore guns and knew how to use them.

Cupping his hands around his mouth, he shouted. "Savage, listen to me! No guns! Get me a stout rope and find some hoe and pick handles, but no shooting!"

For a stupefied second the men gaped at Frank. Then they moved into action. A long-legged farmer came up with a large coil of heavy rope, and Frank tied one end to the axle of a large farm wagon. Taking the coil he unrolled it, ran across the mouth of the camp, and secured the rope to the rear wheel of an old ore wagon, drawing it knee high and as tight as he could pull it.

Savage joined Frank, a marked worry plain on his clean features. "Why did you say no guns?" he asked.

"Start shooting," Frank said, "and there'll be a lot of dead men here. A cowboy is plenty proud, and getting the hell beat out of him with a hoe handle will dent his pride a lot more than a bullet will. Now get the men around these end wagons, and the women and kids at the other end of the grove."

There was no need for Savage to give the order, for several farmers had already seized on the idea, and the camp was soon vacated. The running horses were less than a half mile away now and there was only a few minutes left.

Frank split the men into two forces, all armed with pick handles or heavy chunks of wood. Fifteen were sent to the other side, where they crouched behind the wagons, while another dozen took cover in the brush by the mouth of the grove. Reily came up, a short club in his hands, and gave Frank a wide grin.

ON CAME the Teepee crew, yelling now, for their blood was hot and they were ready for a night's fun. The rope strung across the opening was almost invisible in the shadows.

"Get set," Frank said tensely, as the riders stormed off the road, taking the lane leading into the farmers' camp. They rode fast and proudly and without heed of danger, smugly confident of their superiority, and when the first wave struck the rope, eight abreast, the force was enough to topple both wagons in a side-splitting crash.

A dozen of Alvertone's men were spilled in the first rush, and the ones following immediately behind became hopelessly tangled among the downed and screaming horses.

A veritable bedlam arose as the farmers darted from their places of concealment, handles swinging, whooping like Indians. The farmers had the complete advantage for the moment, as the few men who remained mounted backed off immediately.

The cursing and yelling rose in a sheet of sound, and one Teepee hand went down with a stick laid across his skull. Another man, still mounted, pulled his gun and leveled it, but a farmer swung an ax handle in a vicious arc and fractured the rider's arm with one blow.

Teepee was not winning this and they knew it. Most of the downed horses were now on their feet again and running free

of the melee, while the battle raged thick and fast behind them. Half the Teepee crew was on the ground in the first minute, while from the others, still mounted and wheeling away, there came the first burst of shooting.

A farmer reeled from the fight with a bullet-shattered arm and Frank whirled, spotting a rider getting ready to shoot again. Closing the distance in two jumps, Frank clubbed him across the back of the neck with a gun and watched him wilt.

A half dozen Teepee hands still remained on their horses but had withdrawn a short distance from the camp. Some of the farmers were eager to follow but Frank yelled, "Let them go!"

Quickly organizing his group, Savage ran over to Frank and said, "We've got them on the run. Now let's keep them that way."

"Be better to rub it in a little," Frank said, and made a megaphone of his hands. "Teepee? Rankin, you still the ramrod? Can you hear me?"

"I hear you," Rankin called from the darkness.

"Some of your friends are in poor shape. Come in and get 'em, but no guns or you'll get hurt."

For a moment of dead silence it looked as if there wouldn't be an answer. Then at last Rankin called back, "How about sendin' 'em out"

"Come in if you want 'em! Can't you stand to take a licking?"

An angry growl went up from the Teepee men at this. Frank turned to the farmers "Disarm them and get them in one bunch. The ones who can't walk can be carried."

There was the soft sound of hooves in the dust on the road and the remaining Teepee riders, led by Rankin, moved forward cautiously. The firelight touched them briefly and Frank said, "Dismount and help your men out of here."

"Still like to give orders, don't you? You'll get yours for this, Owen."

"Don't push your luck, Miles," Owen advised. "You've just taken the licking of your life and if you want some more, just sing out."

They got down and began to help their friends. Some of the men were coming around. A few could stand, but there were plenty of sore heads.

"What about our horses?" Rankin asked.

"Send a man after them," Frank said, and smiled. "You can walk until they're rounded up." He smiled at the shock that appeared on Rankin's face, fully understanding the mounted man's contempt for anyone who walked. "Get going now," Frank urged.

"Be a sonofagun if I will," one man said flatly. "I wouldn't walk from the bunkhouse to the cookshack."

"Knock him down," Owen said in an emotionless tone and a farmer obliged, flattening the rider with one whip of the hoe handle.

THIS brought a dull murmur from the Teepee men, but Frank drew quiet when he said, "This little party can get mighty rough, boys. What'll it be—walk away from it or fight some more?"

"You're a dead man, Owen," Rankin threatened. "I've always wanted to take you on."

"Get out of here," Frank said flatly, and the farmers began to crowd forward, driving the cowboys out of the camp with their clubs. Savage and Frank stood by one of the overturned wagons. When Savage tried to light a cigar his hands trembled.

"That was close," he said. "Damn close."

"A lot of fights are," Frank murmured, and turned to watch the farmers come back into the camp. The women began to leave the protection of the trees now to rejoin their men. Some of the farmers had been injured and a small cluster of people formed around the man with the bullet-broken arm.

One man ran from the grove toward town after the doctor.

There was no resting in the grove now. For an hour people milled around, troubled and not knowing what to do about it. The doctor came and did what he could, then left again. Reily smoked one cigarette after

another and stayed near Lottie.

Savage was nervous and tried not to let it show. Finally he said, "Do you think Alvertone's through now?"

"Do you?" Frank countered.

"No," Savage said flatly. "I see no end to it. The farmers licked them, but they didn't gain anything. How does it end, Owen?"

"Only one ending," Frank said in a troubled voice. "Alvertone has to go."

Savage was stunned. "Can you push him out? He put his life in this land."

"Someone has to give," Frank said, and rolled a cigarette.

"Sure," Savage murmured. "Someone has to give. That's all right if someone besides Owen Frank does the giving. You made her life miserable—and I'll never forgive you for it—just because you wanted someone besides yourself to give in."

"Are you through?" Frank asked bleakly.

"I'm through," Savage admitted. He nodded toward a fire where men gathered. "That's Lottie's father—Meechum. He's the farmer boss."

"We'll go talk to him then," Frank murmured, and threw away his cigarette. He pushed his way through the farmers circling Meechum's fire and then turned to look at them.

"Be ready to ride in fifteen minutes," he told them quietly.

"Ride on what?" one man asked.

"Teepee," Owen Frank said. "You want land, don't you?"

"I don't want to kill for it."

"Then go back where you came from," Frank said flatly. "You don't belong here."

One man in a square-cut beard shifted his feet and said, "I'll go, but I don't like the idea."

"None of us likes the idea," Frank said. "But the law has to be enforced."

There was a moment of murmuring and talking it over, then they broke away, going toward their own wagons for weapons and mounts. The damp wood popped in Meechum's fire and the big man made marks in the ground with his boot toe. "Alvertone's been a pappy to you, I hear. What kind of a man are you to turn against your own kin that way?"

A sudden temper came into Frank's eyes, but he kept it out of his voice. "I'll tell you something, Meechum. I never liked any man who wanted someone else to do his fighting for him. You're the kind who puts a badge on someone, pays him fifty a month, then expects him to clean up your dirty messes."

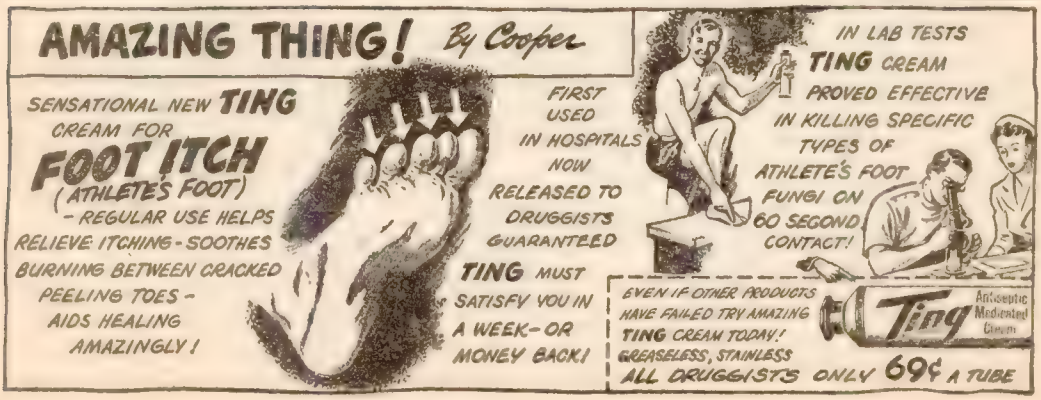
"That's putting it a little strong," Meechum said, his pride piqued. He pawed his mouth out of shape and glanced at Will Savage, but made no further comment.

FRANK squatted before the fire and drank a cup of coffee while the men got ready to ride. When they had gathered by their horses, Frank threw the coffee grounds in the fire and stood up.

"You coming, Will?"

"No," Savage said.

[Turn page]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"You're a hell of a sheriff," Owen Frank said bluntly. "You're not much of a man either."

"All in the point of view," Savage admitted. "When you get back, if you do get back, I won't be the sheriff. Someone else can have it."

Reily checked his gun and said, "We're ready any time you are, Marshal."

"Let's get it done then," Frank said, and saddle leather creaked as men swung up. A dead silence fell over the grove. The women stood by their wagons, their hands folded under their aprons, but there was no calling and no farewells.

Turning out of the grove, the farmers fell in behind Frank at a respectful distance. Once on the road to Teepee, he called himself a fool. The badge was only a piece of metal; if he threw it down, another man would pick it up and no one would ever care. But there was more to it than that. If a lawman enforced the law until he had to hurt a friend or someone he loved, and then began to make exceptions or quit, that was no good. A man had to believe in himself and what he was doing.

There was no doubt in Owen Frank's mind how this night would end. There would be death for some; the story was as old as the land itself. The pattern had been set long ago and there was no deviating from it. At another time and place things would be different, but tonight was merely an extension of other nights. He could guess the end.

He had no heart for what he had to do to Burk Alvertone, for he knew the old man and understood his dreams. He could see something of the old man in himself -Burk had molded him patiently through the growing years.

In Joanne Avery's eyes he had watched the struggle between her need for security and her love of him, and tonight he had read the death of her hopes. She knew that he would leave her again. Perhaps he would not feel like moving on when this was over, but after tonight there would be nothing left besides Joanne.

A man could win and lose at the same time, Frank knew. He had done it before.

Reily edged his horse forward and pulled abreast of Owen Frank. He turned his head and looked at Reily. "You a farmer now?"

"Trying to be," he said. "Lottie and I'll take a little spread of our own. I'm not much for the plow." Reily pointed to a break in the clouds overhead. A fair wind aloft scudded them swiftly along and the rift widened, exposing the black, star-dotted sky.

"The stars never stop shining," Frank said. "Even in the daylight when you can't see them, they're still there. Somehow that's a comfort, especially for a lonely man." He looked at Reily again. "I guess you won't be lonely again, kid."

"Not any more," Reily said softly, and swung around in the saddle to look at Meechum and the others. The sodden plod of the horses was the only sound except the faint protest of leather.

THEY were entering the narrow foot of a valley now and he veered to the left to keep the fringe of the hills close by. Rocks loomed against the open sky and vast patches of timber rose darkly.

"Alvertone will be awake for something like this," Reily murmured. "Especially for you, Owen. He knows you and he can see the wolf in you. You doing this for the farmers or for what?"

For a moment Frank didn't reply. "A man does things for himself. Sometimes he wraps it up real pretty, but when the peeling is off, he's doing it for just one guy."

"I don't think you believe that," Reily stated flatly. He wheeled his horse around. "I'll see how the others are coming along."

For another hour they continued across the widening valley, staying to the western slope of the mountains. The air had a clean, new smell to it and water rushed through fissures from the down-tilting face of the rocks, emptying into a stream. The clouds continued to disperse and a faint light outlined the riders with increased clarity.

In the distance, Teepee buildings reared

from the face of the valley, and there was a sprinkling of lights to mark the outbuildings. Riding on, Frank led them to within a half mile of the ranch, then halted. He waved his arm in a circle above his head and they formed a ring around him.

"Reily," he said, and the young man edged his horse closer, "you and I will go first. The rest of you wait here for fifteen minutes, then go into the yard. Raise hell, but try not to get yourselves pinned down. Meechum, you take charge and create enough trouble to hold them.

"Reily and I will go in through the back some way. Once we get Burk under a gun, we can call off his crew and make a clean sweep of it."

"I got you," Meechum said, and Reily moved off with Owen Frank until the tall man touched him. The night soon swallowed them and they kept their horses at a slow walk, all their senses alert for the first sign of an outrider.

In a grove of stunted pines they dismounted and picketed their horses, moving forward on foot. When they were within two hundred yards of the ranch house Reily pointed toward the bunkhouse. "The crew got back."

The bunkhouse door stood open and a man came out, limping. Someone closed the door and the light was shut off. The light coming from the windows cast pale patches on the ground.

At the main ranch house, several rooms blazed with light. Frank focused his attention on this. "Let's belly up," he whispered, and moved out, Reily following close behind him.

There were a few isolated shrubs to mask their approach, but the night was their greatest ally. Approaching from the rear, they bypassed several small outbuildings and took shelter in a woodshed not ten yards from the back door. There was no light in the kitchen. Reily whispered, "The cook is asleep."

"We'll wait until Meechum makes his run," Frank murmured, and sat against the rough wall. The woodshed door commanded a clear view of the ranch house and a partial sweep of the yard, barn and other outbuildings. Lights still glittered from the cookshack and bunkhouse, and once the shadow of a mounted man passed between—a patrol that covered the mouth of the wagon road leading to Painted Rock.

"This could be rough on Meechum's bunch," Reily said nervously, pointing to another rider who crossed from the opposite direction. "When they storm the yard, they'll run smack into it."

"They'd have to run into it anyway," Frank told him. His attention focused on a gradually increasing drumming out on the road, and he cursed Meechum's stupidity for not making a stealthy approach.

The farmers were thundering nearer. One of the guards gave a hoarse shout and armed men spilling immediately from the bunkhouse. The farmers were close, coming on at a gallop, and somewhere near the front of the house a door slammed and a man bawled orders in an excited voice.

BY THE time Meechum and the farmers broached the mouth of the yard, Teepee hands were out of the buildings and carefully deployed. Frank and Reily watched them come on, from the shelter of the woodshed. The Teepee crew let the riders get into the yard before opening up.

The night went mad with crossed fingers of gunfire. Under this racket, the bellow of shotguns was a dull booming. Horses went down and several men left their saddles, but Meechum held to his ruse. He got through the yard, reforming his men on the other side.

"Let's go," Frank said, and left the woodshed, scudding across the backyard and onto the porch. Testing the door, he felt it give, and let himself in, Reily close on his heels. The young man moved around Frank and made his way past a table in the center of the floor. Across the room, some light flowed from beneath a door. They moved toward this, while outside the cannonading began again, this time more intense.

Letting themselves into a long, lamplit hall, Frank moved forward, stopping as Reily held up his hand. Through the front

window flashes of gunfire were clear, but there was a raggedness to the Teepee's firing now.

A moving man was hard to hit, and at this range the farmer's shotguns were proving more effective than sixguns.

The pound of horses faded a little as Meechum wheeled his bunch from the yard to form for another rush. From their position in the hall the two men commanded a full view of the door, but the position was risky, for anyone coming onto the porch could see them and shoot through the glass before either Reily or Frank suspected his presence.

To the left, an archway opened up into a large living room. Reily nodded toward this. Moving around the young man, Frank stepped boldly into the room and found Burk Alvertone by the front window, partially protected against stray lead, and watching intently as the battle was about to be renewed in his yard.

"Turn around carefully," Frank said in a clear voice, and Alvertone stiffened, after a small start of surprise. Alvertone's back was toward them as they stood in the archway, and his hand on the heavy curtain flexed and relaxed before he turned around.

The shooting in the yard had died to a few spasmodic shots. Teepee men called back and forth to each other, for they had wounded and dead among them now; Meechum had breached their position on the last charge through the yard.

"Move away from the window," Frank ordered, and drew his gun. The old man sighed and left his place by the wall. "Over by the fireplace," Frank advised, and Alvertone gave him no argument. Reily placed himself by the tall clock to the right of the archway, shielded by its case. He had his gun in his left hand, ready to cover anyone who came in the front door.

"Call Miles Rankin in here," Frank said in his mild voice.

Alvertone seemed fascinated by some thought, then crossed to the window, wrenching it open. "Rankin!" he bawled, "come in here!"

"That's enough," Frank warned. "One more word and I'll shoot."

Pulling his head back in, Alvertone slammed the window and moved back to the fireplace. There was no more shooting from the yard and someone called out, "Farmers! You have wounded here! Come in and get 'em!" There was no immediate answer and the man yelled again. "You made us come in once, now you can do it. No guns now or there'll be more dead men!"

Boots rattled on the porch and Reily sank back against the wall. "Careful now," Frank murmured, and remained out of sight as Rankin opened the front door and banged it behind him.

HE STOMPED into the room, a big man with a great lust for battle stamped on him. "What's the idea when we got—" He caught the lines of strain on the old man's face and wheeled, killing the motion when he saw Owen Frank.

"There's another one behind you," Reily said softly, "in case you feel real reckless."

Rankin glared at Burk Alvertone. "Where are your guts, old man? You didn't have to pull me into this." Rankin's big hands massaged his heavy thighs, only an inch or two from his holster. The urge was plain in his eyes.

"You're under arrest, Rankin," Frank said. "Don't be foolish now. Alvertone, call off your crew!"

"Damned if I will," he said, but it was bluff and everyone knew it.

"Go to the window, and be careful what what you say," Frank ordered.

The old man's shoulders sagged and he walked with dragging feet. Rankin's face showed a raw fury as he watched Alvertone hoist the window and bellow to the men in the yard. For a moment there was a stunned silence—but they were still Teepee and this was an order from the boss himself. In a matter of minutes the farmers took over, cheering and hazing the bewildered riders into a compact knot.

Boots tramped loudly on the porch and Meechum came in with two other men. Meechum's arm was bleeding from a flesh wound and there was a haggard expression

around his eyes. "We lost Rogers, Harris, Bloom and Evans. Six more have bullet holes in 'em. I sent Clover back to the grove with them in a wagon."

"How did Teepee come out?" Frank asked.

"Six of 'em are laid out with a canvas over 'em," Meechum stated. He looked at Owen Frank. "What do we do now?"

"Give those who are left horses and a chance to run. I'll take care of things in here."

"Some of the men want to fire the buildings," Meechum said. "I'm not sure I can hold 'em back."

"You hold 'em back," Frank snapped. "Go out there and do your job."

Meechum flushed, then nodded to the two men with him and went out, slamming the door behind him. A thick silence fell over the room and Rankin said, "You and I have a game to play, Owen, and we'll play it."

"Don't be a fool now," Frank said, with some tension in his voice.

Rankin laughed and shifted his feet. He stared at the .44 in Frank's hand, then said, "That's a big edge for you to have, Owen. How about putting it away so we can start even?"

"No deal," Frank said. "Once I would have taken you up on that, but things are different now. Just reach over and unbuckle your gunbelt and let it drop. Don't make me shoot you."

"I just got to try it my way," Rankin said softly, and his hand slashed for his gun.

"No!" Frank shouted, but there was no stopping Rankin once he had committed himself. His gun cleared leather and was on the upswing when Owen Frank shot, catching him squarely in the chest and driving the man backward.

Rankin's gun boomed in the room and he fell back against a chair, rolling off onto the floor. He tried to raise himself but there was no strength in him, and he fell forward and lay still.

Someone shouted in the yard and men were running toward the house. Meechum burst in again, his shotgun ready, but he let it sag when he saw Miles Rankin on the floor.

He shook his head sadly.

"Get back out there," Frank told him. "You've got work to do."

"I can't hold 'em," Meechum said. "They're going to burn the whole place."

Frank inclined his head toward the door. "Reily, get out there and see what you can do."

The young man left his place in a hurry and ran outside, calling to the farmers in a sharp voice. Alvertone waited by the fireplace, his head bent forward, his eyes on the dead man.

"YOU'RE through, Burk," Frank said. "I'm sorry, but that's the way it is."

"I know it," Burk said in a low voice." I've been afraid of this, but now that it's happened I'm almost glad in a way. Being afraid is bad for a man. It gets under his skin and eats him away. But I don't have to be afraid any more. It's over, and I can sit in the sun."

"Maybe they won't let you sit in the sun," Frank said. "You tried to play God on a white horse, and they won't forget it." The tall man touched Meechum on the arm. "Get the farmers together; we're pulling out."

"What about him?" Meechum asked, pointing to Alvertone.

"What about him?"

"Hell, he's still here and this is Teepee!"

"Sure he's here," Frank said. "A tired old man who's lost his shirt. Teepee's only a memory now. Go on—get your friends together and get out of here."

"All right," Meechum said, and moved toward the door. "I'll do what I can." The door closed behind him and there was no sound in the room other than the muffled racket from the yard. A triumphant yell floated up. Frank moved so that he could see through the window. A long tongue of flame shot up by the barn, quickly catching the side boards, and in a few minutes the whole wall was aflame.

There was something close to tears in Burk Alvertone's eyes as he saw this. "I put forty years into this place," he said.

"Now you're losing it in ten minutes," Frank told him. "I'm sorry for you, Burk, but you wanted to make big tracks. You were always that way. Now you can make little ones and be content with them. A man sometimes has to make a bargain with life and live with it."

"But not you," Alvertone said. "I raised you different and now I'm sorry. You're a little wrong too, Owen. I guess you do feel sorry for me, but not as sorry as I am for you. You ought to make your own bargain, son. It's been long overdue."

Reily came across the porch then and flung open the door. "Owen, those plow shovers are going crazy out there! They're going to put the torch to everything."

"You think they can be stopped?"

Reily shook his head. "They smell blood now. You know how it is."

"Sure," Frank murmured. "Take Burk out the back way and get him on a horse. You've got ten minutes maybe, and you'd better make the most of it."

Reily agreed and motioned toward the hall. The old man moved his head dazedly. "I built this with my own hands," he mumbled.

"Things are turning rough," Reily prompted, and took Alvertone's arm. "Come on, there's no time to cry about it."

Urging the old man ahead of him, Reily disappeared down the hall. Owen Frank stepped out to the front porch. The yard was bright with firelight as the barn burned with a great roar. The bunkhouse and cookshack were ablaze now, and what remained of Teepee's crew stood by the corral, saddling for a hasty exit.

MEECHUM came across the yard at the head of a half dozen men. His face was grim and determined. He stopped at the base of the porch and said, "Don't try to stop us, Marshal. We're going to fire the house too."

"Burning everything won't help you any."

"It'll be the end of Teepee," one man said. "Good men died here tonight."

"On both sides," Frank reminded him, and switched his eyes from one to the other.

"Get out of our way," Meechum said. "We don't want to manhandle you, Marshal."

"You think you could?" Frank grinned crookedly. "All right, send in a couple of men and haul Rankin out, then do your damnedest."

Meechum's eyes turned hard as agates. "Rankin? Where's Alvertone?"

"Gone," Owen said flatly. "I had Reily slip him out."

Several men cursed loudly at this, and an ugly mood engulfed them. Meechum said, "I had a hunch you'd do something like this."

"But you're too late to do anything about it," Frank mentioned. "I've seen men like you before—start out to do one think, then end up in a hanging mood."

"I'm not going to stand here and argue with you," Meechum said, and turned to the men at his right. "Get some of the men to bring fire over here."

Frank watched the man run across the yard, then stepped off the porch to walk around the house. Skirting the small woodshed, he crossed to the brushy thicket where he had left his horse. He swung into the saddle, although he didn't move out.

He waited there for fifteen minutes, until he saw the fire ignited and growing through the rooms of Alvertone's house. When the flames began to break through the roof, he turned his horse and rode slowly down the wagon road leading to Painted Rock.

Behind him, men called back and forth. From their tone he understood that they were enjoying themselves, the price of the fight was temporarily forgotten. A mile down the road he found Reily waiting for him, one leg crossed over the saddlehorn.

There was a bright glow on the horizon, marking the funeral pyre of the Teepee empire. Frank's thoughts were sad as memory flooded him. Beyond that, the first light of a new sun tinted the sky, and he studied it for a long time.

"Not a pretty sight," Reily remarked, and took out his tobacco. He rolled a smoke and offered the makings to Frank. A match glowed for a brief moment and was

passed between them, then whipped out.

"Where's the old man?"

"Gone," Reily said softly. "Does it matter where?"

"To me it does. I didn't want to do this to him."

"But you did," Reily said.

Frank stared at him. "You think I shouldn't have?"

The young man moved his shoulders in a shrug. "Every man makes up his own mind, Owen."

"Yeah," Frank said. "The prize is never worth the cost of the fight—only the fools and the very young believe it is. I should never have come back."

"Some men just have to come back," Reily said, and ground out his smoke. "Some men want to erase everything behind them, but it just leaves a mess."

"Let's get back to town," Frank said, turning his horse.

"A man can't go on chasing the sun, either," Reily murmured. "She leaving with you?"

"I don't know," Frank said. "That's what I want right now, to leave here and put this all behind me, but that won't work. It just rides along with you. Sure, I want her with me, but she's a proud woman, Reily. If she yielded to my way, I wonder if I'd appreciate her giving in."

The thought stirred his latent dissatisfaction and he tugged his hat firmly in place, rapping his horse into a lope. For a few moments he thought Reily was still with him, but a look back showed the young man far behind.

WITHOUT changing his pace Frank rode past the grove, seeing the bright fires against the growing dawn light. Women moved around but there was silence there, for dead men lay covered on the ground.

At the hotel he swung off. There were a few lamps burning in the stores as he paused to look at the familiar street. Painted Rock was like an old friend, for he understood its mood, its vagaries, its violence; he had indeed contributed to all these parts in his short stay.

In a few brief hours he had changed men's destinies and brought others close, but he alone remained the same, still troubled, perhaps more so than when he had arrived.

Tying his borrowed horse, he entered the lobby, now bare and lifeless. There was enough daylight now to see the stairs clearly, and he went to his room. In the upper hall he halted at Joanne Avery's door, the rake of his spurs stilled for a moment.

On the other side of this thin panel waited a woman warm and full, but he could not go to her, for theirs were different dreams.

He moved on to his own room down the hall.

Rolling his blankets with haste, he gathered his saddlebags and turned toward the door. This ritual of moving was in no way different from other times, yet he felt a heavy burden of regret that he must leave. He was shaken by a wavering doubt as he stood there.

Finally he shouldered his bedroll and saddlebags with a quick, impatient motion, and let himself out. Passing her room again, he saw a shadow move across the line of light coming from under her door. The urge to knock was almost overpowering. There were many things he could say to her, but they must all end in good-bye.

Shaking his head, he continued on down the hall, his spurs striking a musical note as he descended the stairs. On the street he paused to look both directions, then walked toward the stable.

Once there, he saddled his horse, and fastened bags and bedroll to the rig. When he saw a shadow fall across the stable doorway he turned his head. She stood there, wearing a man's pair of blue jeans and a blue flannel shirt. Over her arm she carried a light mackinaw, and at her feet was a bedroll and a small canvas valise.

"I got tired of waiting for you," she said, and moved along the stalls until she nearly touched him. A small smile lifted the ends of her lips and there was no reservation in her eyes. "I'm the way you wanted me to be, Owen. I found that I had to have you, on any terms."

Understanding how strong her pride was, and how dear her dreams, he knew what this cost her. It chipped away the last stone between them. For the first time in his life he knew real humility, and recognized the uselessness of his life as it had been. He had never bargained with himself or any man, answering only the dictates of his iron will. Now he saw how wrong he had been, and a new sense of ease ran through him as he acknowledged this bargain with himself.

Taking her arm, he smiled. Even now, she still mean to put her hopes aside for him, because of her love. He said, "You could do this for me, Joanne?"

"I have to, Owen. I don't want to go on without you."

Like a smear wiped from glass, the trouble left his eyes and he laughed. "You don't have to. I'm not going any place. Someone else can chase the sun."

For a moment she did not trust herself to speak. "This is for good, Owen? You're sure? I couldn't stand it if you were ever sorry."

"This is for good," he told her, and cupped her face in his hands.

His kiss was gentle and alive and there was no past to trouble him. He thought only of tomorrow and a life that would be full and satisfying.

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. What is the more common name for the so-called horned rattlesnake of southwestern deserts?

2. Valle Grande, in New Mexico's Jemez (HAY-mace) mountains not far from Los Alamos, is the world's largest what?

3. Describe the official tree blaze or blazes used to mark trails in the National Forests.

4. The Ginkgo Petrified Forest State Park, fairly near the towns of Ellensburg and Yakima, is in what state?

5. When an oldtime wagon boss told his crew he would not stand for any whittle-whanging on the roundup, what did he mean?

6. The Brown Palace is a famous old hotel dating from the boom days of silver mining—in what capital city of what state?

7. "Los Pastores" is a religious folk-play or drama much performed by Spanish-Americans in the southwest, dealing with the birth of Christ. What does "Los Pastores" mean?

8. Sun Valley, famous winter-sports resort, is in what state?

9. Which of the following is meant by "the border shift": (1) a *vaquero's* undershirt (2) a change in the boundary line between the U.S. and Mexico due to the Rio Grande shifting its channel (3) a border patrolman's turn at duty (4) a trick in handling a sixshooter, once common on the border?

10. Under what circumstances do range cattle habitually hump up their backs?

—Rattlesnake Robert

You will find the answers to these questions on page 109. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

a true story by

Bob and Jan Young

Chipeta, the Protector

OURAY found few supporters among his fierce Ute warriors for his friendship towards the hated, invading white man. By protecting white settlers from attacks by his Rocky Mountain tribe, Ouray had lost considerable favor in the tribal council.

One who brooked no criticism of Ouray was lithe, dark-eyed Chipeta, daughter of another Ute chief. "The Arrow is a great leader. He knows that we cannot fight the white man and survive. Is it not better that we be their friends, and live in peace, than have our tribe destroyed?"

Such logic, while sound, found favor only with Ouray and a few followers. And Ouray made his admiration known to the girl by various tribal honors. It was but a few months later when tribal signals were

The saga of an Indian woman's wisdom and courage

given that a marriage was to take place.

Chipeta was to marry Chief Ouray. He was 26, she was 17, and the year was 1859.

Ouray became even firmer in his defense of the white man after the tribal marriage ceremonies had been performed. His restive tribe required a strong leader for such a policy, but Ouray, with the understanding help of his beautiful wife Chipeta, felt equal to the task.

Because of his courage and understanding, Ouray was called to Washington to negotiate a treaty to dignify his position with the Utes, as well as to consummate an agreement for defense of the ever-increasing number of settlers in the Rocky Mountain area.

Chipeta's marriage was idyllic, and happier still when they had a son, named Loquito. But tragedy soon struck this brave girl and her husband.

Following Ouray on one of the extended buffalo hunts to supply meat for their tribe, Chipeta hung her baby in its sheepskin-lined cradle on the frame of the tepee. She went about her many chores, paying little attention to the infant.

Chipeta had to gather some wood and had other tasks which took her away from the camp. When she returned to tend the baby, she found the cradle board and the baby gone.

Chipeta and Ouray were inconsolable over the loss of their only son. A widespread search was started, and for days the woods were scoured in the hope that the abductors had dropped the infant in their haste to escape. But when no sign was turned up, Chipeta and Ouray knew their son was in the hands of another tribe.

Stoically, they convinced themselves the boy was dead, rather than think he might grow to manhood and one day be one of the warriors which occasionally stormed the Ute camps.

DESPITE a mounting feeling of unrest and tension between Ouray's tribe and the whites, Ouray had to take an extended trip away from camp and took Chipeta with him.

With the strong hand of Ouray and Chipeta no longer present to stay a blow against the hated white man, a sub-chief in the Utes lead an attack against the Indian Agent in their territory. Agent Nathaniel Meeker was slain, along with others in his office. In addition, the Utes dragged off the women and a three year old child.

Chipeta knelt beside Ouray, who had been taken desperately ill on their trip, to relate the shocking news of the massacre. "The Indian Agent has been killed by our tribe. They have taken women and children captive," she told him.

"You must go at once to stop them," Ouray commanded. "You are their chief in my absence. Go at once."

Chipeta hurriedly mounted her horse and started down the long trail to their home camp. The road ahead pointed through wilderness, fraught with danger. Unfriendly tribes of Indians lurked there, and wild animals added to the hazard.

Chipeta dodged arrows, and wildly spurred her horse to elude capture. She fled from marauding animals and beat her way through storms, but at last she arrived safely in the camp of the Utes to carry out the commands of Chief Ouray.

The Utes grumbled and snarled when Chipeta demanded that the surviving women and children be released from bonds and brought to her at once.

"We are in command now," the leaders told Chipeta, but they reluctantly obeyed when she threatened them with instant death upon the return of Ouray. They might not agree with their Chief, but they did fear him.

Chipeta made the survivors comfortable, taking particular care and interest in the child among the group. She gave no thought to her own care or comfort while providing for her sisters of the usurping race.

TENSION and open rebellion was apparent among the Utes after the Meeker massacre survivors had been released and returned home. Ouray was still gravely ill, and only Chipeta's soft but firm hand prevented the Utes from further depredations on the whites. Then

Chipeta lost control of them and of herself.

Ouray, the Arrow, was dead, in this year of 1880.

Chipeta, in her sorrow, turned away from the now unfriendly tribe. In modest custom, she, aided by a few still-friendly chiefs, buried Ouray in a secret tomb to prevent desecration by the now rampaging Utes.

Sadly she turned away from his grave —sad not only because of his death, but from the knowledge that his great efforts would go unsung and unmourned.

Not knowing where else to go, Chipeta returned to the Utes. She was reluctantly accepted but made to assume a menial place in the tribe where once she had been a leader.

With the death of Ouray, the pomp and glory of the Utes gradually declined. Chipeta believed it was retribution for their cruel treatment of Ouray, and failing to pray to the white man's Christian God, which made the settlers survive where the Indians couldn't.

And like the other Utes Chipeta withered, became poor. She finally died in 1924 at the age of 80. Her death almost went unnoticed, until seven years later when a group of citizens raised $1000 for a monument in Chipeta's memory for unflagging friendship towards pioneers, and her courageous ride to save survivors of the Meeker murders.

With Chipeta gone, the location of Ouray's grave was also thought to have vanished.

But finally one surviving chief came forward and told the location of the grave. He had been touched by the honors bestowed on Chipeta; Ouray must have his long-denied share of the glory that rightfully belonged to both husband and wife.

Ouray was reburied alongside his faithful wife, amid the strange mixture of chants from Utes, Apaches, and Navajos, which blended with the hymns of the Christians, all united in reverent respect for two brave and faithful Indians, Chipeta and Ouray, the protectors.

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THE stage was unloading its train passengers from Desert Wells when the kid eased into camp. So nobody noticed him at first. Bill Canfield was the best whip on the desert trails, and when he rattled over the bridge and wheeled up before the Bug Eye stage depot, a dog fight could not hold an audience.

So the kid just walked his horse into camp and stopped it in front of the Basin Saloon where he took a long look at the dusty Concord from his saddle seat. He made a high, lean figure, with a crop of whiskers, and he was begrimed by some long trail. He looked hungry and thirsty and tired and a little stirred by what he saw now. Then he slouched out of the saddle, racked the horse, and trudged into the saloon as if his joints were stiff.

"No gun guard on that hack," he said to the barkeep, who was vacantly examining the stage from his front window. "How come that? I hear there've been some stick-ups around here."

The barkeep said, "Nobody wants the job, that's all."

"If it's a job," said the kid, "I want it."

The barman pulled around, a rotund man who probably was amiable when off the job and free to be himself. Now he showed a professional reserve, through which only hints of a sympathetic interest appeared. Almost he smiled, but something in the kid's eyes decided him otherwise.

He said, "Hunting work? You look like a cowpoke to me." His expression intimated that the kid's horns looked green to him, as well.

"I'm a puncher," said the kid, like he was proud of it. "And I'm hunting work. Which is scarce in the cow country this time of year. Thought I'd try one of these mining camps." He dropped a dollar on the counter. "They call me Dunsan. Worked on the BJ through the beef gather. That's down on the White Pine."

"I know," said the barkeep. He set up a glass and whiskey bottle, then rummaged a match from a box on the back bar and built a new fire on his cigar. Then, "Been hard on shotgun messengers lately. Last one killed was Ed Daughterty, three days ago. He used to ride guard on the Placerville stage. Right good man with plenty of experience, and them road agents shot him off the box. Third man who never knew what hit him."

"How about drivers?" said Randy Dunsan. "They running short, too?"

"That's Bill Canfield over there," said the barkeep, as if Randy had ought to recognize the name. "Got the best whip hand in the desert and a charmed life to boot. He come through all three stick-ups without even a powder burn."

THE GUN

THE STRANGER SAID he was just looking for

Three horses swarmed down the trail, and Randy's gun blazed

GUARD

By GIFF CHESHIRE

work, but he wanted the most dangerous job in town

"Who's the man to see about the shotgun job, then?"

"Elmo Purcell's the station agent. Does all the hiring for the company. Look, why don't you try your luck at prospecting, Dunsan? The boys are cleaning up right now. New strike up the main gulch only last week. New sections being opened all the time."

"Mining's too blamed risky."

The bartender finally smiled.

RANDY DUNSAN gathered his change and tramped out to the board walk. He hitched his belt as he paused, letting an increasing curiosity idle both ways along the street. He had a long upper lip, strong nose, and lively eyes. He stuck his thumbs under his belt, not to swagger but because it anchored a couple of brown hands. The belly was flat, the hips lean.

Bug Eye was one of many new placer camps in the hills. It could have been a cowtown, he thought, but was busier, dirtier and more shabbily built. The street was crooked, tilted, and the structures presented fronts that showed they had gone up in a hurry. There were few horses strung along it, and no rigs except the stage. There was a place that called itself a bank, but that could be pried open with a pinch bar, from the look of it. The assay office was something new to him, which also was true of the Chinese laundry up the street.

The stagecoach was empty now, the new arrivals sifting off. Randy took a good look at the man climbing back to the box. The barman had called him Bill Canfield. Randy saw a man maybe five years his senior, around twenty-five or six. He was thin and brown, deliberate and sure in his motions. He fingered the ribbons and the stage wheeled right at the next corner, probably making for the stage barn.

Randy pondered whether to talk to the whip first, or go over and see Purcell. But he decided that the agent could say yes or no as to his getting the shotgun job, so he tackled the thick dust of the street. A man with a blocky chin and big teeth was sorting express in from down country. The job didn't seem to give him much pleasure, and it was hard to guess what would.

He swung about and looked across the counter, where Randy stopped. He only lifted an inquiring eyebrow. Randy said, "You Purcell?"

"That's right."

"Hear you're looking for a new gun guard."

"That's right, too." The agent was bored, not seeming to realize he was receiving an application.

"I'll take it," said Randy. "Sight unseen."

Purcell pulled up his shoulders. "Had any experience?"

"Bushels."

"Where?"

"Down through the cow country. All the way from here to the Rio Grande."

"What I thought. But riding shotgun and punching cows are two different lines of work." Then Purcell lifted a hand and stroked his lantern jaw. He made a gust of breath that was not derisive but the explosion of some sudden wonder.

Pressing the matter, Randy said, "I heard about the stick-ups when I come through Desert Wells. Happening only on days when there was a gold dust shipment, with nary a sign of trouble between. Somebody on the inside's tipping off the road agents. Why don't you find out who? That's the first thing I'd do."

The eyes of Purcell narrowed slightly. "There are only three people who could. Me, the man runs the bank, and Bill Canfield. How'd you go about finding out which one it is?"

"It's sure one of the three," Randy said easily. "And I wouldn't be apt to say how I'd go about rooting him out. Point now is—do I get that job?"

"I'd have to think it over," said Purcell. "You come back in the morning."

Randy shrugged and went out. The stage driver was standing on the near corner talking to someone. Randy's glance barely touched the whip, for the girl drawing his attention was slim and dark and pretty. Right now she was angry at some-

thing—that or rebellious. But she hushed as Randy walked up.

TOUCHING his hat, Randy looked at the jehu and said, "I just bid on the shotgun job on your hack, Canfield."

"You?" the girl said, uninhibited by what had kept the barkeep and station agent more tactful. "Go on, bub. This is no time for jokes."

Randy didn't mind—not from her. He figured that he was at least two years her senior, so his dignity was not involved.

"Friend," said Bill Canfield, "they get shot off my box real often and real quick. Anybody tell you that?"

"Been hearing nothing else. But Purcell's considering it. Said he'd let me know in the morning."

"Look, sonny," the girl said bitterly, "you're better off in a saddle than on Bill's seat. And you're better off, Bill, with no guard at all than somebody you'd have to take care of."

Seniority notwithstanding, Randy had trouble staying on top of that one. He said, "I need a job."

"Then find one you can handle. My brother's life's at stake every day he drives the stage. I don't aim to have him killed from having to wet-nurse any—"

"Now, Penny," Canfield cut in. "You're talking out of turn, and we better go home. I want my supper, anyhow." The whip nodded apologetically to Randy. The two left, going the other way along the camp's twisting street, and were soon out of sight.

Randy wanted his own evening meal, which would be the first since breakfast. But he went down to where his horse was racked, rose to leather and rode until he came to the yawning doors of a livery barn. He said to the man who ambled out of the shadows, "Put this fleabones up for the night, will you?"

The stableman looked at the kid's worn, high-heeled boots, his slick-rubbed Levis, faded shirt and high-peaked hat. He said, "Come up to buck the tiger, did you?"

"Not me. Lost my job and need one."

"They don't do much hiring around here except a few shovel hands at the sluice boxes. You wouldn't like that, bub. Not in them boots."

"Mining gives me the creeps. Why a man'd take a long-shot gamble like that, I dunno. I put in with the express company for that gun guard job."

"Out of Bug Eye," said the hostler, "that's a mite chancey itself."

"Winter's coming and I gotta have a job."

"I could use a man around the barn."

"Thanks," said Randy, his heart warmed by the fresh reminder that people usually tried to help him out. He hoped it would work with the depot agent, even if it had not with Penny Canfield.

He ate supper in Pounder's restaurant. He emerged onto the street to see Elmo Purcell come out of the Basin Saloon and cross over to enter the stage depot. Randy scratched his jaw. He had been tempted to hail the man and press for a decision now. Better, he decided, to let Purcell take his own time about that.

He went to the hotel, then, checked in and was given a hot upstairs room. There was a water pitcher and wash basin on the stand, all that the space offered besides a bed and a hard-bottomed chair. He stripped down and scrubbed himself. Afterward he shaved, regretting that he had no clean clothes to don nor money enough to buy a change.

The regret came mainly from the good chance that he would see Penny Canfield again. He liked the cut of her, in spite of her resentment, and apart from the fact that she was an exciting example of womanhood. The next time he hoped to make a better impression, even though his shaved face looked still younger than with its growth.

HE SAW before him in the mirror a set of friendly, guileless features, and he saw there the look that the young could not lose nor the old regain. He wondered what the hell difference age made, anyway. He had undergone as much in his short life as some men endured in twice the years—any range waif did.

The light in the room was losing its in-

tensity. But it was too early in the evening to consider staying there until bedtime. Descending to the street, he saw Bill Canfield turning into the Basin Saloon, and followed him there.

The whip was at the bar, but the plank was so crowded that Randy had to take a place farther down. He ordered whiskey, not wanting it, but because it was the thing to do. Randy lifted the drink to take a sip, and suddenly it jumped and the whole room seemed to explode behind him. He knew at once that it had been the crash of a pistol shot, right at his rear. He hauled around, his jaw sagging, half the liquor slopped out of his glass.

He swallowed hard and stared at a man standing there grinning at him. The man, obviously a red-shirt miner, held a sixgun, and smoke dribbled out of its barrel. The slug had ploughed into the sawdust at Randy's heels.

The miner was looking at him derisively, getting ready to laugh. And then he did, letting out a roaring blast of sound. When he got his breath, he yelled, "Gun-shy, by God! And this kind wants to ride gun guard on the stage! What do you boys think of that?" He was big, rough-featured, and his eyes showed the heat of drinking as well as raw mirth.

But his merriment only drew a dutiful titter from the other miners about. Randy put his glass back on the bar, hitched his belt, and tried to grin at them. He heard the bartender growl, "Cut that out, Arp. I told you I won't stand for your monkeyshines in my place. Put up that hogleg now."

"Only wanted to see what this button's got to offer," said Arp, "that made him hit Purcell up for the job vacated by the late Ed Daughterty. And Andy Bromfield and Jake Tetherow. By God, they weren't gun-shy. We lost a passle of dust, lately. To my mind a gun-shy driver's bad enough."

That brought a gasp from the gallery, and Randy felt his temperature drop ten degrees. Bill Canfield's voice said, "Anybody would jump if a gun went off at the seat of his pants. Put away that iron, Hoagy Arp, and leave this fellow be."

Randy's cheek had developed a twitch. He knew what every man watching expected of him or Bill Canfield—that one or the other would turn down this big fellow's wick. He did not do it, and Canfield made no move. Randy only stood there gulping, trying to grin it off and looking sheepish as if his galluses had parted at a dance. Arp reholstered his gun and went to a table. Seating himself there, he picked up a card hand he apparently had put down to start the hooraw.

Canfield said, "Come on. There are better places to spend an evening."

RANDY followed him outdoors. On the sidewalk Canfield halted and shoved back his hat, saying, "Need work pretty bad, huh?"

"Poor time to get laid off. Most outfits button up after fall round-up. Things stay pretty quiet till spring."

"I could get you on at the stage barn."

"Much obliged," said Randy. "That Arp sure wanted a fight. Who's he?"

"Got a claim up the gulch. I guess there's been a little talk around here about me. Been through three stick-ups, with three messengers shot off the seat beside me, and I never even got bullet burned. That's what Arp meant. I didn't take it up with him for the same reason you didn't."

"We're scared of him," Randy said.

"Are we?" said Canfield. "Well, if Purcell puts you on, I'll see you in the morning. Roll out at eight and get back around six. It's a turnaround. We meet the noon train at the Wells. If you don't line up anything, see me when I get back."

"Thanks again," Randy said.

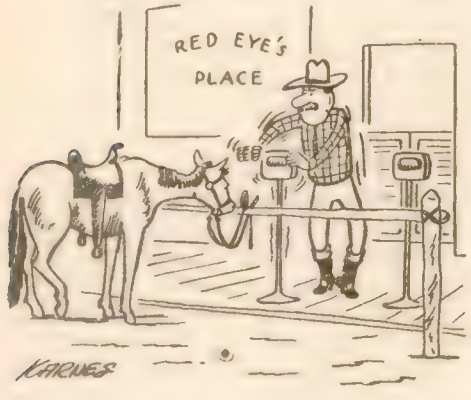
He stood there a while after Canfield had left. He had a wonder on his mind, a curiosity as to how Hoagy Arp had known that he had applied to Purcell for the messenger job. He had mentioned his wish to the barkeep, the depot agent, Bill Canfield and the liveryman. He could see no reason why any of them would mention it in conversation with Arp.

He remembered that he had seen Purcell emerge from the Basin just before he

had himself checked in at the hotel. A new curiosity struck him, and he turned at an opposite angle across the street. Maybe he had ought to crowd Purcell before the man heard about the rawhide that had made him a laughing stock already.

The depot door had been locked, but a little rattling on the latch brought Purcell. The man opened the door, nodding vacantly. He said, "Yes?" and sounded irritated.

"Wondered if you'd made up your mind," Randy said. "I ought to know before I turn in so I'll get up on time in the morning."



"Look," said Purcell, "you're wasting your breath and my time. That job calls for a seasoned hand. Hate to put it so plain, but you keep crowding me. Better find something you can handle, bub."

"Well, thanks," Randy said and turned on his heel.

He was not surprised when, around ten o'clock, knuckles hit the wood of his door. Crossing over, he opened up to see Purcell standing there. The depot agent had an apologetic, more friendly look on his face. He stepped in at Randy's nod and did not speak until the door had been shut again.

He said, "I was too hasty, this evening. There's no harm, I reckon, in giving you a trial. If you want to go to work in the morning, report to Canfield at the stables before eight."

"Why, thanks," Randy said. "That sure suits me fine."

"You got a hunch or anything about who's tipping off the road agents?"

"Not the slightest. You leave that to me, Purcell. If I'm going to ride gun guard, I aim to lighten the job some over what it's been lately. Stick-up or two a year's all a man should be asked to handle."

There was a queer look of satisfaction on Purcell's face he could not completely conceal. Randy wondered at that and at the man's complete change of mind in the last couple of hours. If he had heard about Arp's rawhide in the Basin in the interval it should have further discouraged this offer. Randy closed the door behind Purcell, then shucked off his clothes and went to bed with the prospect of a day's work ahead of him again.

BILL CANFIELD could not conceal a considerable surprise when Randy reported to him at the stage barn the next morning.

"Ready," said Randy, "to help you hold down that high seat."

"Look, Dunsan," said Canfield, "I felt it from the start. There's more to you than meets a man's eye. Just how old are you, anyhow, and what's back of you?"

"A thousand years and a thousand miles," said Randy, and he grinned.

The run to Desrt Wells was downcountry, and Randy found it pleasant. They had a full load, with baggage piled on the deck behind the box. The sky was a quiet, empty blueness, the country was a rolling and open expanse of green sage and tawny rocks. Bill handled the ribbons like a fiddler might a bow, drawing forth precisely what he wanted from the horses at just the time he needed it. The road itself was rough, there were only the leather thoroughbrace springs, yet the box rode as smooth as a good saddle seat.

There was a long, rocky stretch in which several questions rose in Randy, but Bill had little to say all through that morning. They made the turnaround at the Wells, picking up passengers and express from the noon train. The return trip, upcountry,

went slower, and Bill at last felt more like talking.

Randy had spotted the place correctly coming down, five or six miles in which rimrock narrowed in upon the stage road, where boulder nests and rock taluses bespoke a constant danger of outlawry. They were about a mile into this, going back, when Bill let out a sigh.

"This is where it happened the last time," he said. "The first was on the upper end of this arroyo, and the second about half way between. But always in here. Every time the guard was drilled without a second's warning. Then three men boiled out at us from the rocks right beside us. Without decent notice, any man's a setting duck on top this rig. That's how lowdown they are, and why they got away with it every time."

"You do any shooting?"

"Just once. The first time. And one of them sent a slug drilling through the panel that come close to killing a little girl on the seat inside. They don't give a damn what they do—they want the gold dust. After that once, I've shoved up my hands when I was told to or the killings would have been a lot worse."

"For which Hoagy Arp called you gun-shy."

"That's what he called me. You heard him."

"You know it when you've got dust in the boot?"

Bill shook his head. "Not since the first time, and that's mighty odd. It's like they distrusted me."

"Or want you caught flatfooted."

"Or," said Bill grimly, "are getting set to pin the deadwood on one Canfield. Everybody knows there's an inside leak. And there's been talk that I only made a show of fight that once, with the road agents careful not to shoot back at me."

"They've almost got you in trouble," Randy agreed.

MAYBE that bit of understanding had something to do with what Bill said when they reached the stage barn, after discharging the passengers on the Bug Eye end of the run.

"You figure on staying at the hotel? Hot and noisy there, to say nothing of expensive."

"Reckon it's the best I can do."

"Why don't you come and board with us? Ed Daughterty did."

"Your sister doesn't care for me much."

"Penny be blamed," said Bill Canfield. "We'll go get your warbag, if you're willing."

"Much obliged," Randy said.

Bill had picked an attractive place to live with his sister. It was below the camp, and sat past a creek that had to be crossed on a footbridge. It was a rough camp, with all the gulches holding scum, and Randy bet Penny could hold that bridge like a Paiute warrior could cork up a canyon.

Much alone and thus alert, she spotted them on the bridge and came to the door of the little cabin, a log structure shaded by old cottonwoods. As they reached the house, Bill said, "You remember Randy Dunsan. He made the trip with me today."

Penny pulled in a long, slow breath. "So Purcell put you on."

"He's going to board with us," Bill said, and frowned.

Her own eyes heated in quick response, but she did not let go. Randy knew she thought that the arrangement would not be permanent, in light of the fate of the last three gun guards. She said, "Supper's ready. I'll put out an extra plate." Her features indicated that she would as soon feed the guest in the yard where a few hens were pecking about.

Bill and Randy washed up at a bench outside the door. Toweling, Randy said, "You didn't take bait from Hoagy Arp, last night, because you're suspicious of him."

"And of somebody else. I had a little trouble picking out that one. He did it for me. Turned me down cold, and inside of two hours swapped ends. Came all the way up to my room to tell me he'd changed his mind. Something happened between. Like maybe he saw Arp and learned how the green kid doesn't have any spunk to go with his strut."

"You've got plenty of both," Bill said, grinning. "And the talk you're making could get you killed."

"Maybe we'll take down a gold shipment tomorrow. That's what might get me killed."

"Not you," Bill said, shaking his head. "Me. They know I'm suspicious. I figured Arp was trying to get me to brace him last night. It's got to be one of the three of us—Purcell, Forsythe in the bank, or me. I know it isn't me, and Forsythe's honest as the day is long. So it's Purcell, and Arp doing the road work with a couple of sidewinders helping him. Arp would have killed me, last night, if I'd so much as slid a hand toward my gun."

"So," said Randy, "he'll have to shoot you off the box, along with a braggy, tenderfoot gun guard."

"That's not the half of it. When I'm dead and gone, I'll be blamed outright for the leaks. The stick-ups will stop, to prove it, because they must know they've crowded their luck too hard already. Randy, that's why Purcell changed his mind and hired you, after Arp reported on how well you came through the test—from their way of looking at it."

"Rather have somebody beside me up there with you?" Randy asked.

"For some damned reason, I wouldn't," Bill said. "I don't figure you for any bumbling greenhorn, although I'm blamed if I can figure you out. You played up your scare a little big when Arp gave you the hooraw. But I'd feel some better if you'd answer a question. What're you doing here? Who sent you?"

"That's two questions," Randy said. He was combing his hair, using the mirror on the log wall. "And they could be answered three ways. I don't reckon the express company likes what's been happening to its dust shipments out of Bug Eye. Then I could just need a job, like I've been trying to tell everybody. Or—well, the thing most on your mind. There are outlaw gangs in this country that would think it a good joke to horn in and highjack a gold shipment from under the noses of the local boys. Take your pick."

"I'll sure keep wondering which," Bill admitted, "till you cut deeper into the deck."

It became evident that Penny had listened to every word. They entered the cabin to eat, and although she joined them at the table she was more than annoyed at the new state of affairs. Randy did not blame her a bit.

WHEN the morning stage wheeled up at the depot's board awning, there were fewer passengers waiting than had come up from the railroad the day before. It was almost as if the camp distrusted riding with a green shotgun guard more than without any at all. Randy was on the box with Bill Canfield. He had the express company's shotgun across his lap, his own six-shooter riding his hip. If the watchers figured he was showing off again, he did not mind at all.

He did not swing down to the sidewalk behind Bill, but slid over in the seat so he could see who got into the coach. There were three miners, a man who looked like a drummer, and that was all at first. Two men brought out the express chest and heaved it up into the boot. Bill looked up and down the street to see if any latecomers were hustling toward him. He gave a sudden start. Looking in the same direction, Randy narrowed his eyes.

Penny had come around the corner by the bank and was hurrying toward them. She wore a perky little hat and had a light shawl across her shoulders against the cool morning air. She carried a purse, keeping a pretty tight grip on it.

Bill squared himself in front of her as she hurried up, and he growled, "Not so fast. Where in tunket do you think you're going?"

"Desert Wells. You wait till I buy my fare."

"What on earth for?"

"Maybe," said Penny, hurrying past him, "I want to see the choo-choo cars."

But Randy was less surprised when Elmo Purcell sauntered out of the depot, wearing a dark coat and hat. He grabbed the hand hold to step up into the stage,

Bill swinging around toward him with eyes turned cold and hard.

"Taking a little trip, Purcell?" Bill said.

Purcell only nodded, and got inside. Bill's mouth pulled into a ruled flatness, for Penny came out just then. He put a hand on her chest and said, "Huh-uh. Not this trip."

"And why not?" she demanded. "I paid my fare."

"What have you got in the purse?"

"Maybe my beanshooter. I understand there's sometimes trouble between here and the railroad. Bill, I'm going. I'll hire a horse and follow if you don't let me on the stage, so you might as well adjust yourself to the facts of life."

Randy saw from her eyes that she meant it, and so did Bill. The protest Randy had been about to add to the whip's died in his throat. Better to have her where they could watch out for her than let her dust around on her own. He cussed himself for having voiced his suspicions where she could hear them. But it had not occurred to him that she would decide to deal herself in on the game. Bill shrugged in resignation and turned to swing up to the box.

Once the stage was over the bridge and lining out on the long downcountry trail, Bill spoke quietly. "You see Purcell get aboard?"

"It was in the cards," Randy said. "But I wish Penny hadn't taken the bit in her mouth."

"She'd have hired a horse, just like she threatened. And maybe got herself into worse trouble. You don't know that girl, Randy."

"Aim to, though," said Randy Dunsan.

HE GOT very little pleasure out of that morning run down the grades. They changed horses at Christmas Creek station. The fateful canyon lay between there and the next stop at Roaring Springs. There was a creek to be forded somewhat short of the long rock field, and Randy was thinking of that as the stage rolled nearer. Bill let the horses drink as they crossed, always, and that was the place, Randy figured, to do what he had to accomplish next.

That decided, he tried to ease himself by paying closer heed to the roundabout. The hills in the high country possessed a marching alignment, creating, in this mid-morning, deep and stretching shadow washes. Sage blanketed the bottoms, while the inclines rolled bald and burning to a coppery sky. Once he saw a sage hen make its scuttle into hiding, its hatch streaking it behind. Again a gaunt coyote rose, yawned, and looked at the stage with discouraged eyes.

Then they topped the last rise before the creek ford, alkali dust twisting far behind. Randy sucked in a quick breath and felt his blood crash in his temples. But outwardly he showed no symptoms of tenseness. Bill clucked one of his commands to the teams, slowing them down the final slant. Then he shoved hard on the brake, short of the ford, dropped to the ground and loosened the check reins.

Randy was ready when the whip climbed back up. He had put the shotgun aside and had his six-shooter in his hand. It was pointed squarely at Bill's chest. It brought a bolt of consternation into the driver's dark eyes.

"Get up here," Randy whispered, "and drive on into the crick and let the critters wet their whistles."

Bill emitted a long sigh, picked up the reins as he reseated himself, and rolled the coach on down. Randy could feel the jar of the rocky creek bed in his spine. The vehicle stopped in the stream and the horses drank. The current was cold and clear, and Randy was thirsty himself by then—the kind of thirst that comes from being scared. But he held his gun on Bill Canfield.

When the horses were finished he said, "Don't say a word, Bill. Just draw up and stop on the other bank."

"Damn you!" Bill breathed defiantly. "I invited you into my home—introduced you to my sister—"

"Take it easy, man."

Bill drove on, letting the spans pull the heavy Concord up the bank without any

encouragement from him. He stopped obediently on the flat, sandy space just beyond. Carefully, Randy reached over and pulled the whip's pistol.

He said, "Drop down, now."

He followed Bill to the ground. He ushered the whip before him as he walked back beside the Concord to the side door. He yanked the door open, saying, "All right, folks. Get down."

He had never had more trouble with his feelings than when he looked into the furious eyes of Penny. There was a shocked bewilderment on the face of Purcell. The others were cowed, obedient, and did not matter much to Randy.

"Pile out," he said.

Purcell was first to the ground, his hands held up, and Randy lost no time in pulling the revolver out of the short holster on his belt. He took Penny's heavy purse, having to jerk it out of her hands, and realized she had a gun in it. The miners and the drummer were unarmed. Randy lined them up along the side of the stage. Purcell's eyes raked him.

"Who the hell planted you on me?" he breathed.

"Who would you say?" Randy taunted.

"Maybe," Penny said, "it's a lone wolf we all took for a curly lamb."

"Thanks, ma'am," Randy told her promptly.

HE KEPT well back. The others were frightened, obedient, but he knew that any one of the three he cared about would jump him in a flash. He looked first at Purcell, then at Bill, and finally at Penny.

He said, "Turn your back, Miss Canfield—in which privacy your brother can shuck out of his loud shirt and jehu's hat. He and Purcell are going to swap a few duds."

"Are you crazy?" Bill demanded.

"Except about your sister." He saw Penny's shoulders lift at least two inches. She had turned her back as ordered, and he was glad he could not see her face. "Bill, you wouldn't have agreed to it. So it had to be this way. You and Purcell swap the upper part of your get-ups. Then Purcell's going on the box in your place."

Penny hauled around, flinging Randy a half-comprehending look, and then she smiled. She really meant it, too, and it was like the first bright day after a long winter. She breathed, "Of course, and who if not me is the nitwit? Go on, Bill, and do what he says."

"By God, no!" bawled Purcell.

Bill saw through it, too, and some of the fury softened out of his features. He said, "What do you know?" Then he grinned a little.

Purcell seemed to realize that his shocked protest had revealed more than he had intended. He made a show of indifferent compliance when he took off his coat, shirt and hat, then put on Bill's louder shirt and set the floppy, telltale whipman's hat atop his head. Bill stretched the agent's black coat a little, and the hat of the same color perched inadequately on his crown.

"Now," said Randy, "is it safe to give you and Penny back your guns?"

"Depends," said Bill, "on what part in this you're going to permit yours truly."

"Bill," Randy said earnestly, "you can do more good inside than out, this trip. They're going to plug Purcell, thinking he's you. They don't figure I'll give 'em much trouble. They'll come in. For once there's got to be a shooting passenger inside."

"I'll handle the inside," said Penny, "but you're right. Bill's got to be where they can't see him."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Purcell said flatly, "but I'm not driving that rig."

"You're going to ride the whip's seat, anyhow," Randy told him just as flatly. "Even if I have to rope you to it. Climb up now, blast you. And you don't even get a gun for self-defense."

Purcell could not help swallowing, and all of them noticed. But he was in a bad spot, for admitting knowledge of what was coming was confessing to three capital crimes in the recent past. He swung onto the iron step and climbed up. Bill didn't much like the role assigned him, but saw

its worth and got in. Penny followed, and Randy knew better than to tell her to stay.

But to the others he said, "I reckon you'd as soon have a picnic here by the creek." They did not refute that, and Randy went up behind Purcell.

He could see that the man's hands were shaking, but there was enough bluff left in him so that he gathered up the ribbons. He knew how to drive the teams—must have got his start with the stage company, somewhere in the past, by doing so. The Concord rolled on, with the start of the canyon only a couple of miles ahead.

PURCELL'S arrogance lasted to within a hundred yards of the portals. Then he began to shuttle uneasy glances from side to side. Randy was inclined to do the same, but was convinced that more than a normal worry wormed in the man.

"What's the matter?" Randy said finally. "It's always been the gun guard that got shot without any warning. Why should it be different this trip?"

"I don't know what your game is," Purcell said huskily. "But I'm damned if it's my job to drive this hack through the canyon."

"It's yours as long as I've got this gun in your ribs. Get on, now. Quit slowing the horses that way."

Purcell managed to keep driving until they were a short way into the shadowy, rock-walled canyon. Till that point the parallel rims stood well apart, with little between to furnish cover for an ambusher. But ahead was a rock pinnacle, right beside the stage road, rising out of a boulder nest that had Randy himself concerned. They were not quite within rifle range of there when the agent swore, and stopped the teams. He grated, "The hell with you. I don't know what you figure to make out of it, but this is as far as I go."

"Fine," Randy said. "You just bought yourself a necktie. You can get back inside now where the young lady can keep her gun on you. And I'd suggest that you not trifle with her, Purcell. She's dynamite. Bill's coming back up here, but still wearing your duds. That way they'll have to show themselves to find out what the hell."

He called Bill out, then made Purcell climb down and get in below. He had no doubt that Penny would keep the agent docile through whatever came. Bill had a cool, tight grin on his face when he mounted back to the box.

"Bet you can play checkers," he said. "Some dull evening we'll find out. What now, if I may ask?"

"This time," Randy said grimly, "you show 'em that, given a decent chance, nobody can take gold dust off your hack."

He was considerably relieved when they got past that first rock crop without being molested, which assured him that the road agents had not observed the latest exchange of drivers. Purcell himself did not appear to know just where the set-up had been made, only that it was somewhere in the canyon. Randy was glad that Bill was human enough to show uneasiness—because that was what he felt, himself.

Now the shaded reaches of the road were more frequent, darker. At times the canyon walls spread out, obviating the chance of an outbreak of violence. Again the borders hugged in, with all the signs dead right for such action.

Finally Randy said, "I think they let us pass, Bill. For his own protection, Purcell must have told 'em he'd be wearing the dark suit and hat. Now they're wondering what the devil he's doing on the box. Hope it didn't scare 'em out."

Bill nodded. "This won't hurt Purcell much, unless there's actual trouble. And I'm anxious to get the whole coyote bunch cleaned out." They were going into a blind turn then and, as the wheels rolled on, the driver stiffened in the seat. He said in a whisper, "Wait a minute. Horse droppings up there, still wet. Nobody's passed us and we've met nobody. They let us go by, cut ahead and got around, then came back in to the trail here. Any time now."

A narrow, straight stretch followed, not over four or five hundred feet long. Randy was certain Bill was right, and by letting the stage tool past under a close inspection the bandits had gained assurance that the

driver was not Elmo Purcell. If they had identified Bill there was still a chance of a swift, fatal shot from hiding.

BUT apparently the road agents were not that certain. There came a crackling of pistol shots forward, then three horses swarmed out of the rock up there and drove straight down the trail. Rising to his feet, Randy used both barrels of his shotgun, dropping it as he went over the side. Bill had the sense to go down on the opposite side, just as fast.

Randy crowded against the near animals for what protection he could get. The shotgun had been ineffective against the outlaws, who still raced straight at the Concord that blocked the road. They were masked, but he recognized the big figure of Arp. By then he and Bill were laying such a deadly pistol fire against them that they hauled off the road into the rocks.

Within seconds a more patient, deadlier shooting was coming from those rocks. Arp was determined to make it a decisive action, aware finally that he was fighting to save his own neck—whether or not he cared about Purcell's. Randy cut over, got into the rocks himself, and at once began to move toward them.

He got high enough to see the peak of a man's hat, and let go at it. The hat dropped from sight and he sprinted forward. A gun blazed at him and he thought the slug had eaten a hole in the side of his shirt.

He gained cover just as a second shot rang out. From there he saw a man sprawled flat on the earth, unmoving. Another edged himself to the side of a rock. Randy shot just as the fellow tried again, and saw his slug reach home. He did not like the feeling it gave him, but it was a grim necessity—because of Penny and Bill, and a few hundred miners who worked hard for their gold dust.

There had been other shooting, but all at once it was so completely quiet he could hear his ear pulses crash out in their beat. The high-pitched voice with which he called out didn't sound like his own.

"Where are you, Bill?"

Bill answered from the right, and still there was no more shooting in response to the calls. Randy made his way down to the trail just as Bill did, neither of them wanting to chance getting shot by a friend. They looked at each other, without elation, but with the deeper feelings of friendship and of satisfaction in a nasty job put behind. "I got Arp," Bill said then. "He was my meat, all along. But we better see about Purcell."

The agent had not mustered the courage to defy Penny's small hand gun. His voice still tight and foreign, Randy said, "I guess you've had all you want of his company, Penny. We'll rope him on top with me and Bill, then go back and get our passengers. I reckon they still want to take the train."

"Randy," Penny said quietly, and her eyes asked his forgiveness. He had no doubt that his own granted it promptly.

They left the road agents where they had fallen, but took Purcell on to Desert Wells. There Bill wired the express company's division office. He sent for the sheriff to put an official end to the case.

It was an hour later before he came back to the stage yard where Bill waited, because he had little taste for the wave of hero worship unleashed by the story the passengers had told. Penny had absented herself, but she came back with Bill. Both were smiling.

"There's a job for you with the company," Bill said. "If that's what you were really after. They disclaim you as an agent of theirs. You're sure no outlaw. So you must really have been a cowpoke looking for a winter job."

"That's what I kept trying to tell you," Randy said.

"Well, you can drive this hack as long as you want," Bill said.

"What are you going to do?"

"Company figures I'd make a better Bug Eye agent than Purcell did. How about it, friend?"

"As the new agent at Bug Eye," Randy said, looking at the excited Penny, "you just hired your first man."

SANDHILL

MANHUNT

by SEVEN ANDERTON

NO WOMAN ever stayed single long in Sandy Bend . . . even if it took the whole town to catch her a man

AUNT Birdie Thomas spoke the sentiment of the entire Indiana community when she said, "Esther Boone is a nice little body and a good cook. She ain't bad-looking either. It's a shame some man ain't married her."

Esther Boone agreed with the latter sentence. She didn't want to be an old maid, but she was twenty-three and all the girls her age had been married for four or five years. Esther had finished her second year of teaching a country school and was preparing to keep books and clerk in a drygoods store during vacation.

She no longer had "prospects". The trouble was that too many of Brown County's young men had left

year after year to seek their fortunes in the territory west of the Missouri river. Those who remained could choose from a host of prettier and younger girls from families of substance. Esther was an orphan who had been reared by an uncle and aunt who were not well off, and who had three daughters of their own.

The future was looking gloomy to Esther, when she received a letter from a teacher's placement agency in Indianapolis. The letter informed her that teachers were in great demand out west and that salaries of sixty dollars per month, plus board and room, were being offered for teachers with her qualifications.

For a fee of twenty dollars, the agency would send her a long list of vacancies from which she might choose. Her money would be refunded if she did not find a school.

Esther had saved nearly two hundred dollars. She sent twenty to the agency. By going to where the men had gone, her chances of escaping spinsterhood might be helped and at least would not be lessened. A week later she received the list. She read rapidly until she came to a paragraph which said:

> Willow Flat district, Willow Flat, Nebraska. Sixteen children. Oldest twelve years. Salary sixty dollars, plus board and room with board secretary. Applicant must agree to remain single for duration of school term. Write James D. Massey, Willow Flat, stating age and qualifications. Enclose references and, if possible, photograph of self.

It cost Esther a dollar and a half for photographs, but she got twelve. The pictures showed a dark-haired, dark-eyed young woman with a squarish face and a no-foolishness look about her. She enclosed one with her letter.

THREE weeks later a reply arrived, with a contract enclosed. Esther read the contract first. It contained the clause about remaining unmarried, and another which intrigued her even more. The letter elaborated:

> We liked your references and your letter. We hope the enclosed contract will suit you and that you will come.
>
> We expect to hire a new teacher every year because they always get married, but we want one who will pay attention to teaching for the whole term. We tried an older woman last year, but she was cross to our children—and anyhow she got married during Christmas vacation. After that she was late to school oftener than the children.
>
> The part in the contract about only having company on Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights is because that is quite a bother when it goes on all week.
>
> We would like you to come the last week in August, because our school term starts on September third. Willow Flat is not on the railroad; get off the train at Sandy Bend. Sam Griswold meets the train every day to get the mail. He hauls mail and freight to Willow Flat and he will be watching for you and bring you out.
>
> If you decide not to come please let us know right away so we can try to get somebody else.
>
> Respectfully,
> James D. Massey
> School Board secretary

Esther was thrilled. The letter made Nebraska seem a place created by Providence expressly as a refuge from spinsterhood. She had signed the contract and mailed it in a registered letter before she began to wonder if she had not perhaps leaped before she looked.

Esther knew, of course, that Nebraska had then been a state for twenty-two years. She did some research. Willow Flat was not shown on any map she found. Sandy Bend was one of the widely spaced dots in a large area labeled Sandhills. Some of the things she read gave her qualms until she remembered that a cross old schoolteacher had found and married a husband in four months, right where she was going. And she was neither cross nor old. She would dig into her savings and provide herself with a wardrobe such as she had thus far only dreamed of possessing.

THE four-car train began puffing across Nebraska's sandhills on the morning of the last Thursday in August. The country looked desolate to Esther after Brown County's fertile farms, thriving orchards and tall timber. Here were only low, grass-covered hills, treeless except where

willow, cottonwood, sumac and chokecherry grew close to an occasional small stream. The little towns at which the train halted from time to time were all alike—a small red depot, a few stores, and a cluster of weatherbeaten houses along one or two dusty streets. Saddled horses, and others hitched to buggies or wagons, stood at racks.

One aspect was cheering. At each town a fair-sized crowd was gathered to meet the train. Rarely was there a woman to be seen, and more than half of the men were young!

When the train wheezed to a stop before its depot, soon after one o'clock, Esther saw that Sandy Bend was a replica of all the others. The friendly conductor carried her valise and handed her down to the cinder platform.

A score or more of men were present. Esther wished she had been able to erase better from her garments and person the ravages of the long chair-car journey. The feeling that she was being critically inspected flustered her, and she avoided meeting any of the frankly appraising eyes.

"A passenger for you, Sam," the conductor called to a gaunt, gray-whiskered oldster. "Mighty fine company for a grizzly old coyote like you."

Sam Griswold, in shabby work clothes, moved up and took Esther's valise from the conductor. "She rode all the way from Grand Island with you," he retorted grinning, "she can easy put up with me for nine miles." Then to Esther, "You'll be the new teacher for Willow Flat, miss?"

Esther nodded and smiled. "You are Mr. Griswold?"

"Yep. You got a trunk?"

"And a box," she said.

"I'll put you in the wagon," he said, "then take your checks and get 'em."

Still avoiding the appraising eyes, Esther walked beside him to the wagon. Sam took her baggage check, helped her up to the spring seat, and said he would have her things and the mail sack loaded in a minute. From the greater distance Esther let her eyes sweep the group on the platform. They were a picturesque lot in their range garb and big Stetsons. Most were young, and at least half of them wore gunbelts with holstered revolvers. When one of these managed to catch her roving eyes and smiled, Esther looked quickly away, pretending to occupy herself with the contents of her reticule.

A few minutes later Sam climbed to the seat beside her, shook out the lines over the four-horse team, and the well-loaded wagon moved off. Sam had pushed a packing case under the seat to support her feet. His shabby boots rested on the endgate.

"Mrs. Massey," Sam said, "is going to be right perked up when I drive in with you. She's been fretting you might not get here in time for the reception."

ESTHER gasped. "Reception? Must there be a reception?"

"Sure." A grin wiggled Sam's tobacco-stained whiskers. "Laura has to give one so's not to let any single feller meet you first and make the rest of 'em mad at her. It'll be some fandango. Jim Massey and Hank Astor will start barbecuing the steer early Saturday morning. Bunch of the neighbors laid down the dance platform yesterday. There'll be four fiddlers, six mouth organ players, and two with banjos, so they can spell each other. Hank Astor and me will call the square dances. I reckon you can dance?"

Esther nodded.

"Wouldn't make much difference," Sam went on. Three years ago we got a teacher that couldn't, but she could before the reception was over. She's Mrs. Buck Tolbet now. I'll say one thing, you're the purtiest teacher we've had since the school was built six years ago. One last year was a regular battleax."

Esther felt her cheeks burning. Sam was the first man who had ever told her she was pretty.

"I understand she got married," Esther said to cover her confusion—then wished she had said almost anything else.

"Yep," Sam said. "Making Gus Holt a right helpful woman, too. Stout as a

buffalo. Be quite a scramble to see who's going to marry you, I'd say."

Esther knew she was blushing. "I came here to teach school," she said primly.

"Just the same," Sam assured her, "you'll get married. If you don't, you'll be the first teacher we've had that didn't. Until you pick out one of 'em there'll be so many bucks cluttering up his place that Jim Massey'll have to stay in the barn. They—"

"Mr. Griswold," she cut him off, "this subject is distasteful. How big is Willow Flat?"

"It ain't," he told her. "Just Ed Brown's store and postoffice and John O'Shea's blacksmith shop. You won't go there today. Jim Massey's place is this side."

Esther kept the conversation in hand by firing questions about the country and its people. The road wound among the grass-covered hills, adding distance to avoid grades, and finally came to a small bottom through which ran a little tree-bordered stream. Perhaps a hundred yards off the road stood a square and squat sod house, with a hay-roofed barn and a pole corral beyond. Griswold pulled up his team and let out a lusty whoop. A man appeared from behind the barn and strode toward the wagon.

"Tharen Mosgaard," Sam explained. "I fetched him a sack of flour. He's a bachelor, but it won't do any harm for him to meet you first. He's so doggone woman-shy that he chokes on his tongue if one says anything to him."

MOSGAARD came up to the wagon. He was a big man who carried himself with lithe ease. Perhaps thirty years old, Esther thought. He wore stout work shoes, faded brown corduroy pants, and a gray flannel shirt with sleeves rolled up and the collar open. Thick, unruly blond hair covered his hatless head. Wide shoulders tapered to lean hips. Face and sinewy forearms wore a golden tan. His face was lean, with a square jaw, and astonishingly blue eyes looked from under tawny brows.

"Tharen," Sam said, "this is Miss Boone, the new teacher. I told her your name. Suppose you'll be up to dance with her Saturday?"

"How do you do," Mosgaard gulped, and Esther noticed that his ears reddened. His voice had the pleasant lilt of the Scandinavian male. His eyes met Esther's for a second, then went back to Sam. He said nothing more. Esther had returned his how-do-you-do.

"That's your flour on top back there," Sam said.

Mosgaard stepped back and lifted down the sack of flour with one hand as though it had been feathers. Esther's eyes remained upon him, but he thanked Sam and walked away with his flour without looking toward her again. Sam started the horses and the wagon rolled on to cross a bridge over the stream. "This is the North Loup river," Sam told her.

"Mr. Mosgaard is quite nice-looking," Esther observed.

"Yep," Sam agreed, "but he won't be one of the fellers tramping on each other to shine up to you."

Esther bit her lip. "Doesn't he dance?" she asked.

"No, he fiddles. Best fiddler we have. He'll be the only one to play all the way through Saturday—except when he eats. Right hefty eater, Tharen is."

The wagon had rounded the foot of the first hill beyond the stream. "There's the school house," Sam said. "Built it here to get in the middle of the district. Some kids have to walk more'n two miles anyhow."

"Do they walk all winter?" she asked, her eyes on the small one-story schoolhouse which stood on the flat bottom of a pocket in the hills. There were outhouses, and a coal bin with a shed built onto its side. A pump on a wooden platform stood in the yard.

"They ride ponies when the weather is bad," Sam said. "That's what the shed is for. Reckon you can ride?"

"If the horse is gentle," she replied. "How far is it to Mr. Massey's home?"

"Mile and a half. Too bad it isn't as handy as Tharen's place." He gave her a

mischievous grin. "Of course you could stay there if—"

"Mr. Griswold," she snapped, "I—"

"Wouldn't be scandalous," he chuckled. "If you were to walk in there with your satchel, Tharen would take out across the hills like a jackrabbit. Probably never be seen again. Be a good way for you to get a homestead."

Esther gave him a sharp look. "I hope everybody out here isn't going to tease like you. I should have known better than to believe a single thing you've said."

"Every blessed word was gospel," Sam declared. "I never even lie to my wife."

Esther sniffed. But she hoped at least parts of what he had said were true.

THE two-story Massey home was the biggest house Esther had seen since reaching the sandhills. There was also a large barn and a number of smaller buildings. As Sam's wagon rolled into the yard Esther saw that he had told the truth about one thing. On the sod, west of the house, planks had been laid on level stringers to form a large dancefloor.

Laura Massey came out the kitchen door running. She was a plump, rosy-cheeked woman of forty. There was a smudge of flour on the side of her nose, but welcome was bright in her eyes and smile. She came up as Sam handed Esther down from the wagon.

She nodded to Sam, then said to Esther, "Well, Sam Griswold finally got you here, Miss Boone. I bet he talked your arm off while he was doing it. You don't want to pay any attention to what Sam says. He's full of hot air."

"I suspected," Esther said. "We have people who tell whoppers in Indiana, too."

Sam chuckled. "I never argue with womenfolks, but you see if time doesn't bear me out, Miss Boone. I'm sort of a prophet."

"You're sort of an old rapscallion," Mrs. Massey told him. "Now you come right on in the house, Miss Boone. You must be beat after that long trip. Sam, you fetch her things. You know the room."

On Friday Esther was a very busy young woman. Laura Massey had quickly made her feel at home, and she faced the day well recuperated from her journey. Laura drove her to the schoolhouse.

"You'll have to get set over there today," Laura explained, "because the reception starts at noon Saturday and we have church at the schoolhouse on Sunday. Mrs. Gus Holt—she was our teacher last year—will be there to explain to you about the school records and the books and such. Some more women are coming to give the place a good cleaning up. We'll try to get done early, so everybody can rest up and be ready for the doings on Saturday."

The Saturday "doings" amazed Esther. They began at noon, when hot barbecued beef and a staggering array of other food was served on long outdoor tables of planks laid on trestles. Women and their husbands from all over the district had arrived at midmorning to assist the Masseys with the preparations. It was apparently an unwritten law that single men should not put in an appearance until noon. Esther had the feeling that somewhere there should be an auction block to which she would be led at the proper time.

"Do you always do this for teachers?" Esther asked while helping Mrs. Massey with the Saturday breakfast dishes. The three Massey children were out watching the men at the barbeque pit.

"Yes," Laura replied, "it's the best way for you to get to know everybody right off. Everybody hopes you are going to like us and stay here."

"Mr. Massey wrote that you expected to have a new teacher every year," Esther said.

"We do," Laura smiled at her, "because our teachers always get married. You will, too."

"Don't I have any choice in the matter?" Esther tried to ask the question lightly.

"You'll have plenty of choice," Laura assured her. "There'll be forty to fifty single men here by the time the food is ready."

"What if I'm not interested?" Esther cut in.

"Shucks," Laura said, "girls are always interested. Or is there some fellow back in Indiana?"

Esther was embarrassed. "No, there isn't. But this makes me feel so—so—" she floundered.

"You'll get used to it," Laura predicted. "There are a lot of first-rate young fellows hereabouts. A girl that stays single a year in this country is just a born old maid. You just look them over and see if you don't find as good a man as any girl could want. Bear in mind that any young fellow is going to need some house breaking—and the older they are the harder they are to straighten out."

Esther sighed and abandoned the subject.

BY NOON the wide yard and the corral were filled with vehicles and horses. Nearly two hundred men, women and children were noisily and merrily busy at the long tables. Nearly half were single men, smooth shaven and arrayed according to Sandhill notions of Solomon in all his glory. Jim and Laura Massey and Esther Boone ate dinner in the house.

"Soon as everybody is fed," Laura told Esther, "we take you out in front and they'll all come by to meet you. Then the women will all come in the house and we'll get acquainted, while the men pitch horseshoes and open a keg of beer they've got down in the granary. There'll be a jug or two of whiskey, too. But if anybody gets drunk he'll get chased home before the dance starts in the cool of the evening."

Dressed in old-rose satin, trimmed with white chiffon, Esther stood with Laura Massey and other School Board wives while the reception line passed. The jollity and warm friendliness of the sandhill neighbors made it much less an ordeal than Esther had expected.

Sam Griswold came by with his wife. "I told Martha you were prettier'n a red heifer," Sam said, "and you can ask her if I'm not a truthful feller."

Martha Griswold smiled at Esther. "He tells it most of the time, but he sure twists it into some terrible shapes."

The spruced-up single men, well-brushed hats in hand, smiled at Esther, said words into which they had put a lot of thought, and passed on. Esther found herself watching vainly for one square-jawed face.

The end of the line was finally reached and Tharen Mosgaard had not appeared. Esther felt piqued. She knew Mosgaard was among those present because, from a window, she had seen him at one of the tables. As she turned to follow Laura Massey into the house she scanned the men milling about the yard, but caught no glimpse of his stalwart figure.

It was four o'clock when Jim Massey came into the house and asked the forty-odd women, "Reckon you gals could help us shake our feet for a couple of hours until supper is ready?"

The women were ready. During the visiting, Esther had learned that of the forty-three women present only two besides herself were single. Both of the others were eighteen—and both were to be married in November.

The musicians sat on kitchen chairs in a hay rack drawn across one end of the dance platform. Seats for the women had been made at either side of the platform by placing planks across nail kegs. Esther saw Tharen Mosgaard, in the hay rack tuning up his violin. Then Sam Griswold walked onto the platform and announced, "There will be four square dances between every two step or waltz, so all us men will get a chance to swing Miss Boone. Handle her easy, boys, we want her to last. Hank Astor and I will call every other square dance. Now get your partners for the first one."

Esther's heart was in her mouth. What was going to happen? All the wives would of course be led out by their husbands for the first dance, the engaged girls by their fiances. Was she going to be trampled by other men, as Sam Griswold had predicted?

ONLY months later was Esther to learn why that did not happen. Only one swain, a different one each time, came to claim her for each dance. This

Tharen helped her up, and then she was in his arms

and the order of their coming had been determined by a lottery involving a poker deck, which Sam Griswold shuffled. The forty-seven single men drew a card each as they filed past him.

Before a halt was called for supper Esther had favored eighteen partners, but felt sure she had been swung at least a dozen times during the maze of quadrilles and reels by every man present—expect Tharen Mosgaard. That conscientious fiddler had not stirred from the hay rack. Her first partner had asked to escort her to supper and, on a hunch, Esther had accepted. This simplified the refusal of offers that came with each change of partners.

It was growing dusk when supper was over and dancing was resumed. Lanterns, hung on ropes stretched between tall poles at each corner of the dance floor, were lighted. It was nearly eleven when Sam Griswold walked onto the floor and announced:

"The *Home, Sweet Home* waltz will be next, and I want to announce that my wife is available. She says I can dance it with Miss Boone—which I'm going to do if I first have to whip every young dude in this county."

This brought yells from the men and laughter from the women, as the music started and Sam came, grinning, to where Esther sat.

As they moved onto the floor Sam told Esther, "This is a put-up job to head off a stampede by those buffalos trying to get the last dance."

Esther laughed. "Do your put-up jobs always work?"

"Almost always," Sam replied. "In case you need any expert hanky panky done just let me know."

Preparing for bed, Esther reviewed the day. It had been exciting and she had enjoyed it. These people had made her forget that she was a stranger in a strange land. Their eager friendliness was warm and genuine. For the first time in her life, Esther had been the belle of the ball. She had met dozens of young men, all of whom had expressed desire to further the acquaintance. This was all marvelous to a girl who has never had a real beau.

She was too tired to remain long awake, once in bed. She wished she didn't have to get up in time to be at the schoolhouse for church at ten o'clock. The gathering had broken up with people calling to each other, "See you at church." Hardy souls, these sandhillers. Esther went to sleep wondering whether Tharen Mosgaard would be at church.

While they did the breakfast dishes Laura Massey asked, "You having any company this evening?"

"No," Esther replied.

Laura gave her a sharp glance. "Not because nobody asked to come?"

Esther wished such questions didn't make her blush. "Several wanted to call," she said, "but I want to rest tonight and be fresh for the first day of school."

"How many is several?" Laura asked.

"I didn't count," Esther said.

LAURA smiled, looked out the window, and walked to a door near the foot of the stairs. "You kids," she called up to her brood, "get dressed and get down here. Your pa is hitching up."

A few minutes later, after throwing out the dishwater, Laura asked, "Any fellows ask you to go to the dance at Sandy Bend this Saturday night?"

"Several," Esther said. "I said I couldn't go." Then, defensively, "It's the first week of school and I have to do a lot of work if I'm going to be a good teacher."

Laura nodded. "Don't do the fellows any harm to know you ain't too anxious. You notice any of them that you liked especially?"

Esther thought about Tharen Mosgaard, but said, "No, I didn't."

"Hm-m," Laura said as they took off their aprons. "I'll have to go up and hustle the kids along."

Tharen Mosgaard was at church. He sat at the end of the organ, at the back of the rostrum, and played his violin. Mrs. Frank Burr, a thin gray-haired woman, played the organ. The pastor was a stout, bald man

named Estes. He lived in Sandy Bend, driving out for the Willow Flat services; hence the early hour. His sermon was short, most of the hour being given over to the singing of hymns. These were sung lustily. Esther put a dime in the collection box, then went out with the Masseys. Reverend Estes was at the door to speed his departing flock.

As the Massey carriage rolled out of the schoolyard Esther saw Tharen Mosgaard swing down the road toward his homestead, violin case under his arm.

"Mr. Mosgaard plays the violin very well," Esther observed.

"He sure does," Jim Massey agreed. "Month or so ago I was late getting home from Sandy Bend with a load of lumber. When I came past his place about an hour after dark I heard him sawing away on his fiddle. I pulled up the team and just sat there and listened. He didn't play any tune I knew, but it was sure mighty pretty. I hadn't had any supper, but I stayed there and listened until he quit and blew out his lamp. Ma jawed me when I got home."

"Do you play any instrument?" Laura Massey asked Esther.

"No. But I often wish I could learn the violin. Does any one around here teach it?"

"No," Laura said. "We've talked about trying to get a schoolteacher who could teach music, but—" she shrugged. "Jim, whip up the horses a little. We'll be late with dinner."

SCHOOL started on Monday. Esther was very busy. Besides teaching, she had to be her own janitor. Nevertheless, Esther found it impossible to stay out of the community's social whirl. Numbers of the local swains found frequent excuses to call at the Massey home—always around supper time. In the sandhills an invitation to table was mandatory in those circumstances. On numerous evenings the Masseys fed as many as three extra mouths. By coincidence, this occurred almost always on Friday, Saturday or Sunday.

Games of whist, euchre, checkers, etc. always followed. One young fellow, Pat Cunningham, was particularly persistent with his attentions, but Esther had been warned against him.

"You be careful about Pat," Laura Massey told Esther after his first call at the house. "He isn't to be trusted by a girl. He got Susie Brand over at Sandy Bend into trouble last year, but his pa bought him out of it and the Brands moved away."

Cunningham was a big handsome youngster of twenty-six, son of one of the region's biggest ranchers. Esther remembered that he had held her too tight at the reception dance and that he had smelled of whisky. She heeded Laura's advice, even when Cunningham "happened" past the schoolhouse one evening just after school let out and pressed her to accept his escort to the Sandy Bend dance on the coming Saturday.

September passed and Esther had not yet accepted an invitation from any of the eager suitors. The reason, she was forced to admit to herself, was Tharen Mosgaard. This vexed her. She scolded herself. Hadn't she come to this far and strange country to find a man—almost any man? That thought made her blush, even in the privacy of her room. But it was true. And now here she was, avoiding the advances of dozens of nice and substantial young men, because she couldn't get her mind off one who wouldn't even talk to her—one she saw only at church. It was frustrating.

Laura Massey was also baffled. If Esther would only show a preference it would lighten the cooking and entertaining chores in the Massey menage. But she didn't want to hurry the girl.

Laura puzzled over it and even dropped an occasional hint, but light on the situation did not come to her until early October. It was customary at about that time to have a program and box supper at the school house. Esther had been told about this. Her part was the preparation of a program of songs, recitations and dialogues by the children.

"All the womenfolk will fix up boxes," Laura Massey told Esther, "and you have to have one. All the young fellows will be

there trying to guess which one it is and buy it so they can eat supper with you. Makes all the boxes sell higher. The money goes into the school fund and helps keep the taxes down."

Esther put in extra work preparing the children for the program. Most of them were willing and eager.

"I have trouble," Esther told Laura, "getting them to carry the tunes. I guess that's because I don't do it too well myself."

"I forgot to tell you," Laura said, "Mrs. Burr will come any time you want her to and play the organ for them to follow. Just send word to her by the Bailey kids. She always plays for some songs by us grown folk during the evening."

A week later Esther screwed up her courage and said to Laura Massey, "I've been wondering if I could get Mr. Mosgaard to come and play his violin at the program?" She felt her face flushing before her question was finished.

LAURA didn't miss the blush. They were in the kitchen. The Massey brood had been sent up to bed and Jim Massey was out bedding down the barn stock for the night.

Laura dropped the apple she was peeling into the pan, and a gleam of understanding came into her blue eyes. "Well I'll be doggoned," she exclaimed. "So that's it! You have your eye on Tharen."

"I have not," Esther denied, but her ruddy face called her a liar.

"High time that young fellow was married, too," Laura went on. But he's so bashful that you have a job cut out for you. You'll need help."

"It's not like that at all," Esther protested.

"Fiddlesticks," Laura retorted. "It's written all over you. I must have been blind. Nothing to be ashamed of, girl. If I were young and single, don't know but what I'd pick Tharen myself. He's a hard worker, doesn't drink much, and he's coming right along on that bottom homestead. You could do a lot worse. But like I said, you'll need some help—and you'll get it. You ever talk to Tharen?"

"He said how do you do to me the day Mr. Griswold brought me here," Esther replied.

Laura laughed. "That's a lot—for Tharen. But you quit fretting and get to work on him. Us women will help—and enjoy it. We'll use our men, too, if we need them."

Esther's cheeks were still burning. She hadn't really confessed, but Laura had made her feel as though she had. "He *is* handsome," she said, "and—and—"

As she floundered, Laura laughed again. "And he makes a little chill run up and down your back when you look at him."

Esther squirmed and looked down at her hands clasped in her lap.

"That's natural," Laura went on. "Jim still makes me feel that way. Tharen Mosgaard is a man who can make that feeling last, too—and until now he's been going to waste."

"It's—it's not like that," Esther muttered, still looking at her hands.

For a moment Laura stared at her in tight-lipped silence, then snapped, "Hell's fire, girl. Do you want Tharen Mosgaard or don't you? Look at me."

Esther lifted tortured eyes. "I—I guess I do," she said.

"Then you'll be promised to him, come Christmas," Laura declared, "but we have to get right to work. Sewing circle meets tomorrow afternoon at Baylors'. I'll tell the other women. And tomorrow right after school you go down to Tharen's place and ask him to come and play at the program. You can drive old Nell and the buggy tomorrow and take our kids with you, so it will be all proper." She smiled. "Not that it wouldn't be anyhow—with Tharen. He'll agree to come—he likes to fiddle and he always comes to the programs anyhow, to watch. He never bids on the boxes. There are always more men than there are boxes anyhow, so he has a good excuse. M-m, something might be worked out on that. But one way or another Tharen Mosgaard is about done being a bachelor. We—"

Esther smiled in spite of herself. "It—it sounds so—so *public*," she said.

"Most everything is public hereabouts," Laura said, "but us women'll keep this to ourselves—except for a man or two we may need to use. You do what I told you, and we'll talk some more tomorrow night. You better go along to bed now. Jim will be in soon, and I'll tell him about you needing Old Nell and the buggy tomorrow on account of bringing some things home."

AS SOON as they were alone in the kitchen the following night Laura Massey demanded a report from Esther.

"He said he would come and play with Mrs. Burr," Esther said.

"What else did he say?" Laura prodded.

The bay snorted with fear of the fire

"Then he said he had to dig some potatoes before milking time, if I would excuse him. He picked up a pail and went away towards his garden. That was all."

Laura laughed heartily. "That Tharen!" she gasped after a moment.

Esther smiled. "It was a slop pail he picked up."

"I talked to the women at the sewing circle," Laura said. "I gave them to understand that it was my own idea and you're not supposed to know anything about it. I just said I had been watching and I was sure the reason you have been so standoffish to the other fellows was that you had a hankering for Tharen Mosgaard. That was about all I had to say. The girls all got busy on ideas for putting Tharen where you can get at him. We didn't get much sewing done after that, but you can leave it to us that you'll have plenty of chances. How you handle them is up to you."

The program and box supper were held on Friday night, so it wouldn't compete with the Saturday night dance. The night was crisp but not unpleasant. The hitching racks around the schoolyard were full. At least a score of the most persistent swains were there, and all had come in buggies. It was established custom that the purchaser of a single girl's box not only ate with her but also escorted her home, provided of course that he too was single.

The women all brought boxes, fussily wrapped in secrecy, and kept them wrapped in a shawl or some other covering until placing them in a cloakroom set aside for that purpose.

There was a goodly crowd. Makeshift benches had been placed along the walls, and extra chairs brought to fill the aisles. A dozen or more men still had to stand.

Tharen Mosgaard arrived with his violin and made his way quickly to his chair at one end of the organ. The entertainment began with the songs and recitations by the pupils, lest some of the younger ones succumb to the sandman before being called upon. This consumed an hour. Then Sam Griswold mounted the rostrum and announced the auction of the boxes. There was a stir of anticipation.

Sam Griswold, with his gift of gab, was perennial auctioneer. On this night he was in good voice and form.

"Now all you gents know that the proceeds of this supper go into the school fund," Sam began. "Besides that you know there isn't a bad cook in these hills, and every box will be chock full of better grub than any of you deserve."

"Heck with the hot air," a voice called from among the standees. "Sell the boxes. I want to sit down."

Griswold waited for the laughter to die, then went on. "I have a few things to say before I start selling boxes, and the less back talk the sooner I'll get 'em said. In the first place, I have trouble with my ears tonight. I can't hear anything less than a

dollar. The school fund is kind of low. In the second place, there is a feller here who always comes and enjoys these programs, but has never yet bid up a box to help out with the fund. I'm not going to mention his name, but if I don't hear some bids from him tonight I'm going to turn around and take his fiddle away from him and bust it over his head."

This brought laughter and shouts of approval. One deep voice shouted, "Don't bid, Tharen. I want to see Sam Griswold try that."

SAM waited for quiet. Covered by the noise, Laura Massey whispered to Esther Boone, who shared a seat with her at the end of the rostrum, "Look at Tharen's face. Red as a beet. We let Sam in on this and he's going to work it to sell your box to Tharen. Minnie Hale is handing them up to him. I showed her yours and Sam and she worked out the rest."

"That isn't fair," Esther protested.

"All's fair in love and war," Laura said. "Tharen came afoot and we didn't have time to figure out a way to make him take you home, but you can loosen him up while you eat supper. That fried chicken and chocolate cake ought to help. Tharen is powerful fond of good victuals."

Laura's whispered conversation with Esther had been noticed by Pat Cunningham, standing at the back of the room. Pat was a sharp lad, and he smelled a put-up job. He was alert as Minnie Hale brought the first box and gave it to Griswold.

"Here we go, gents," Sam said. "Isn't this a pretty box? Besides, it's heavy. Look at the size of it. I got a doggone good notion to bid on it and knock it off to myself. What—"

"Dollar!" Hank Astor shouted.

Somebody else bid a dollar-ten and the bidding rose quickly to a dollar-forty.

Sam turned around. "Did I miss any bids from behind me?" he said. The only male on the rostrum was Tharen Mosgaard.

Mosgaard would rather have had most anything than a supper that he must share with some woman while they sat together at one of the desks or the long table at the rear of the room. But Sam Griswold's intimation that he might be a cheap skate had to be refuted. Redfaced, Tharen tried to make himself raise the bid.

Before he could do so, Sam turned back to the crowded room and said, "All done. Sold for a dollar-forty to Bill Douglas. I'll save you some trouble, Bill. This is my wife's box. I peeked while she was fixing it up—and there's no whisky in it."

Everybody laughed, while Minnie Hale brought out the next box. Pat Cunningham smiled. He thought he had it figured out. One thing he mustn't do was bid at all until the right box came up.

This was necessary because nobody was supposed to buy more than one box—and if Pat were right about the skullduggery, he suspected Sam would put him out of the race by knocking down a box to him on his first bid. Pat had to be foxy.

In a matter of ten minutes Sam sold seven more boxes. He prodded Tharen Mosgaard each time, but turned away and sold the box before Tharen could get his mouth open. Pat Cunningham watched Esther Boone, Sam Griswold, and Tharen, sharply, but did not bid.

Tharen Mosgaard opened the bidding on the tenth box with a dollar bid. This rose by nickles until Tharen bid one-fifty. Most of the other boxes had sold at near that figure. Sam turned from Tharen's bid and said, "All done? Do I hear—"

"Dollar-sixty," came John Walters's first bid of the evening.

Just a little too quickly, Sam barked, "Sold to John Walters."

PAT CUNNINGHAM nodded with satisfaction and sharpened his watch. He saw several little indications. Minnie Hale brought Sam a box wrapped in white crepe paper and tied with narrow purple ribbon. Pat noted that Esther Boone was appearing more than usually uninterested. He turned his attention to Sam.

"Bid 'em in fast, gents," Sam Griswold said, holding up the box. "Folks are getting hungry. What am I—"

"Dollar and a half," Tharen Mosgaard said. If he must buy a box he wanted to get it over with.

Pretending astonishment, Sam Griswold turned around. "Well I do declare," he exclaimed. "That's more like it. I think I'll just—"

"Two dollars," Pat Cunningham shouted, having decided that all the signs were right. He was more certain when Sam was a trifle slow in acknowledging his bid.

However, a number of other young bucks were pretty wise in these matters. They had been watching things—including Pat Cunningham. Harry Peters quickly shouted, "Two and a quarter!"

Esther's sudden flush and avoidance of looking at anything but her hands in her lap was all the needed incentive. Tharen Mosgaard dropped out of the bidding. He was a frugal young man and his funds were not plentiful. Minutes later the bid had passed ten dollars. Sure of what was at stake, the other swains made it interesting, but the outcome was sure. Pat Cunningham had the most money. When he jumped the bid from twenty-two to thirty dollars, to set an all-time record, he got the prize.

"Darn Pat Cunningham," Laura Massey hissed to Esther. "I could brain him with a clear conscience. Now you'll have to let him tote you home, but I'll fool around so that Jim and I will pull out right behind you—and you make him drive straight to our place. And before the singing starts after supper you go up there and thank Tharen Mosgaard for playing. That's proper because it's your program."

Pat Cunningham took Esther home in his red-wheeled, rubber-tired buggy. She dismissed him promptly, pleading the fact that it was nearly midnight.

Later, in her room, Esther told Laura Massey, "He behaved very nicely and I promised to go to the dance with him tomorrow night. After all, he paid thirty dollars for my box."

"Hm-m," Laura said. "I saw you thanking Tharen. Took you quite a while. You got him to talk?"

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Esther blushed. "Yes. I told him I would like to learn to play the violin. He said he couldn't teach anybody because he only plays by ear. That was about all."

"Well, we aren't licked," Laura declared. "I had Jim ask Tharen to come over tomorrow and help put a new foundation under the smokehouse. That will make him stay to dinner, and we'll work it so he'll have to talk to you after. We'll thaw him out."

THAT didn't work either. Tharen came to help with the smokehouse, but Jim Massey had been overheard while asking him. Three other young bachelors just accidentally turned up and remained to lend willing hands. They had to be fed after the job was finished, and the plot was foiled. Esther got no chance to talk with Tharen. He left right after the meal, saying that he had to cut some fence posts along the river. The other three stayed for some time and left only after they had learned that Esther was going to the dance with Pat Cunningham.

Laura Massey was fit to be tied. "I could wring their necks," she fumed. "Tharen's too. The way those three rapscallions grinned at me. But we'll outsmart them. I'll—"

"Please, Laura," Esther stopped her, "don't do anything else. I don't want to be thrown at him like this. If he liked me he wouldn't need—"

"Fellow like Tharen," Laura snapped, "needs a brick house to fall on him."

"Just the same," Esther retorted, "I won't be a party to any more of this. I don't want to talk about it. I'm going to go upstairs and do my hair before Mr. Cunningham comes to take me to the dance."

Laura went out to where her husband was doing odds and ends about the raised smokehouse. "Jim," she said, "you hitch up Nellie for me. I'm taking the kids over to Astors to stay all night. You and me are going to the dance at Sandy Bend tonight."

"Why?" Jim asked.

After Laura told him Jim went and hitched up Nellie. That night he took his wife to the dance, and their rig was not too far behind Pat Cunningham's red-wheeled buggy all the way home.

Laura went upstairs with a rather disheveled Esther. When the door of her room was closed, Esther said, "I'll never go anywhere with him again, nor with anybody else. When the school term is over I'm going back to Indiana." She flung herself on the bed to weep into a pillow.

Esther had surrendered, but her able allies were made of sterner stuff. However, they were handicapped by Esther's absolute refusal to cooperate. All their efforts failed, and October slipped away.

Then the Burlington Railroad, the weather, Boreas and whatever other gods there be took a hand. Spring and summer had been wet, but there had been no rain since just before Esther's arrival. The weather remained unseasonably warm and dry. The plentiful grass throughout the sandhill country had grown brown and crisp. It would still provide food through the winter for the thousands of cattle that roamed the vast expanse of free range, but the sandhill folk were praying for rain or snow to wet it down.

DISASTER struck on the first Friday in November. It was a clear day, and almost hot. A stiff wind was blowing from the west. Esther had given her pupils a written examination. She dismissed them shortly before four o'clock, sending word by young Jimmie Massey that she was staying to correct and grade papers and would be home in time for supper. She watched the children depart and then returned to her desk, where she became absorbed in her papers.

On a grade some five miles west of Sandy Bend, the laboring engine of a freight train spat glowing sparks into the dry grass. Minutes later that scourge of the rangelands, prairie fire, was roaring, driven eastward by the brisk, hot wind.

It was nearing five o'clock and sundown when Esther, absorbed in her work, smelled the smoke. She jumped up and went to the

door. There she stood aghast. From the western horizon a pall of black smoke was drifting over the land. The heat of the wind seemed to have increased.

For a long moment Esther stood bewildered, staring westward into the premature dusk. Then Tharen Mosgaard, riding hard on a big bay horse, appeared from the direction of Willow Flat. Seeing Esther, he swung his horse into the schoolyard and pulled up before her.

"What is it?" Esther cried.

"Prairie fire over west," he replied. "Dry as the country is, it will travel faster than the wind. You come on to my house quick." He jerked his horse around and rode away.

Without hesitation, Esther gathered up her skirts and ran after him. As she reached the road she heard his horse thunder across the bridge. Minutes later when she arrived, panting, the bay stood ground hitched in the yard of Mosgaard's homestead. Then Tharen came hurrying from the barn with his arms full of grain sacks. This was not the shy and bashful Tharen Mosgaard she had hitherto known. This was a capable man doing a job in a race with time.

"Come on," he said, "you will be safe in my house. It won't burn and I will backfire around the buildings."

Esther followed him. He brought a five-gallon can of kerosene from his kitchen and dumped the liquid into an open pail into which he had already stuffed the sacks. Watching him, Esther felt useless.

"What do you mean, backfire?" she asked. "Can I help?"

He took nippers from his pocket and ran to cut down one of two clothesline wires. Dragging it back, he took several of the saturated sacks from the pail and began wrapping one end about the sacks, explaining about backfire as he worked.

"This is a bad one," he continued as he fastened the other end of the wire to a saddle ring. "Unless backfire is set along this side to help the river stop it, everything from here to Dakota may burn. I will set fire to these sacks and drag them east as long as they burn—maybe five miles. More men will come. They know the best chance to stop it is the river. You stay in my house or go lie down in the river. It is low and—"

"Couldn't I set backfire from the bridge west?" she cut in.

"No," he said. "Your skirts and things would catch fire. You just—"

"Have you got another horse?" she interrupted.

"Yes, but—"

"Get him and that other wire," she said. "I'll ride west." Her fingers had been busy. Her long skirt and two petticoats fell about her feet and she stepped out of them. That left her clad only in shoes, stockings, knee-length ruffled panties and her shirtwaist. This was no time to be modest. Tharen ignored her dishabille.

"YOU take this horse," he said. "He's gentle. If it gets too hot, turn him loose and run and lie in the river. I'll follow to the road and set fire to the sacks. Then I'll get another horse and ride east."

Esther moved toward the bay, and Tharen grabbed her and practically threw her into the saddle. A minute later she was riding west, keeping as close as possible to the river, while the flaming sacks set the backfire behind her.

Beneath the black pall in the west an angry red glow was now visible. Esther had to cling to the saddlehorn with one hand because her feet would not reach the stirrups. Snorting with fear of the fire that followed him, the bay needed no urging. Perhaps three miles farther on, Esther saw two riders racing to meet her, dragging fire behind them. The oncoming flames were now plainly visible. The air was thick with smoke and the wind-driven ash. Suddenly aware of her insufficient wardrobe, Esther turned the bay through the timber and urged him into the shallow stream. There she untied the wire from the saddle ring.

Riding slowly back downstream, Esther watched the effect of what she had done. Burning cleanly as it ate against the wind, the backfire had blackened several hundred yards, then met the roaring headfire, and both died for want of fuel.

Smoke and the smell of burned prairie

filled Esther's nose and brought tears to her eyes, as she rode into the yard before Tharen Mosgaard's soddy. She noted with joy that Tharen's backfire, beyond his buildings and stretching eastward, had been effective. The death of the fire, and the smoke blanket, caused darkness to increase suddenly. In the smoky gloom Esther found her skirt and petticoats where she had left them and put them on. She then called Tharen's name several times, but got no reply. From the barn came the mooing of two cows, calling attention to the fact that they needed milking.

Esther went into the house. Darkness there was complete. She needed a lantern or lamp and a match. Moving carefully in the completely strange surroundings, she groped her way. She encountered chairs, moved them out of her way and bumped into a cook stove.

Esther was all but sobbing with vexation. Fire had just destroyed thousands of acres of grassland and here she was, in desperate need of just one tiny flame—and unable to find a match! Then her groping hand again encountered the stove. It was warm—almost hot!

Her searching fingers found a lid and displaced it. Heat rose from the firebox, but no glow. Esther leaned down and blew hard. Ashes came up into her face and eyes. She rubbed her eyes and looked, seeing the red glow of uncovered coals. She wished she had some paper for a spill.

She stooped, tore a large segment from a petticoat, and placed it on the hot coals. She smelled the scorching cloth, but no blaze resulted. She leaned close and blew. Flame puffed with a suddenness that blinded her. She heard, then smelled, the singeing of her hair. Then her vision returned and she saw a box of matches on a small shelf three feet from her nose. A minute later she had found and lighted a lamp.

THE cows were still bawling from the barn. Two milk pails and a lantern stood on the floor near the kitchen door. Esther lighted the lantern, picked up the pails, and went out. The weary bay was standing where she had dismounted. She left him there and went on to the barn.

Esther was almost through milking the second cow when Tharen Mosgaard entered the barn. By the yellow glow of the lantern, which she had hung on a nail in a pole rafter, Esther saw that he was sweat-drenched, ash-blackened, and that holes had been burned in his clothing.

"I think we stopped it at the river," he said.

"That's good," she kept stripping the cow. "The schoolhouse is safe then?"

"Yes," he said. "Feed will be short south of the river this winter, but I think most of the cattle got across ahead of the fire."

Esther stood up with the pail and asked, "What do you do with the milk?"

"I put a gallon in the springhouse," he said, "and feed the rest to the cows and pigs."

"That's wasteful," she said. "Laura Massey says butter is worth ten cents a pound in town."

"I can't make butter," he said as he picked up the milk pails.

Esther took down the lantern and carried it as she walked beside him to the house. Tears of vexation blurred her vision. Now that she was alone with him and he would talk, she was not fit to be seen. She knew that her eyebrows and front hair were singed. Her face was dirty and she had been bedraggled by the splashing of muddy water as she rode down the river. And now she smelled of the cowbarn.

"I don't have a buggy," Tharen said as they entered the kitchen, "but as soon as I take care of the milk I will hitch up the wagon and take you to Masseys."

The lamp she had left burning, aided by the lantern, made the kitchen bright. Esther covered her face with her hands as Tharen put down the milk pails.

"Please don't look at me," she begged. "I look terrible."

Tharen reached out a big hand, closed it about both her wrists, and pulled her hands down. "You don't," he said, "you are the prettiest girl I ever saw."

"You don't mean that," she cried, struggling to free her hands. "Let me go!"

He let go. Esther stepped backward and fell over a chair. She felt that she had skinned an elbow on the rough board floor. Tharen picked her up, and during the process something happened. They were standing, locked in each other's arms, lips clinging hungrily. The embrace endured and became almost violent.

Then Esther twisted her face away and panted, "Don't. You mustn't."

HE RELEASED her abruptly and stepped back. "I am sorry," he stammered. "I—I couldn't help—but I didn't mean anything bad. I am just so crazy about you all the—"

"You're what?" Esther cried, amazed.

"I must tell you now," he said, "because —because of what I did. Don't be afraid. I won't do it again. I—I've thought about you all the time since I first saw you on the wagon. I want—" He floundered.

There was wonder in Esther's dark eyes. "You didn't even dance with me at the reception," she said.

He swallowed hard and shook his head. "I am poor. I do not even have a buggy. It—this is too soon. I do not even have a bed with sheets—" he stopped, his face crimson as he realized what he had said. Then he blurted. "Now I will get my wagon and—"

Esther was not a girl who would let opportunity knock and would run away, although the knock had been timid. "You will *not*!" she interrupted. "You have just said you want to marry me and I won't let you back out. We will talk about—about sheets, later, but right now, Tharen, please kiss me again."

She had stepped close. Tears trickled across the smile she lifted to him. Tharen kissed her. It went on and on and became more and more urgent. They did not hear the buggy drive into the yard. They were only aware of company when Jim Massey entered the kitchen, followed by Laura.

Startled and flustered, Esther and Tharen broke up the clinch. "It's all right," Tharen blurted. "We are going to get married."

"Well, I should hope so," Laura said.

Jim Massey chuckled. "And I'll bet it's all right. What beats me is how you ever got around to finding it out. Just the same, we have a contract—"

"Fooey to your contract," Laura cut him off. "You and that School Board have your nerve, to be meddling with human nature. You come along. Now that we know they are safe, Tharen will bring her home when he gets ready." She grabbed Jim's sleeve and pulled him toward the door.

From the stoop, Laura leaned back into the doorway. "Somebody," she said, "better strain that milk. And blow out that lantern. Coal oil costs money."

Coming up in the next issue

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By COE WILLIAMS

Pussy took to the air, while I held my breath

Flying Filly

By Virginia Gray

THERE were two things I wanted most that June I was twenty-three. One was Rose, one was money. Why I wanted the money was to build a house.

But it seemed I wasn't getting close to either thing. Men I knew, my age, some were married, while the single ones that had eyes in their heads was contesting for Rose. Several times I'd had money put by, when a bad break would eat it up. What my dad had staked me was near to gone.

So when this movie outfit rented the old Kelham place, a mile from mine, it could be lucky for me. They might need help with their stock, being it was a Western they were shooting; and since I boarded and trained horses for a living, I'd have the savvy.

A MAN CAN TAKE just so many chances

before he finds himself riding for a fall

I'd heard by the grapevine they were coming, and from my place I seen when they moved in. So after chores, as usual, I saddled Pussyfoot and crossed the canyon to hash things over with Rose.

I found her in the kitchen, all excited.

"Oh Jim," she says, "isn't it thrilling! This motion picture company—they've moved in with equipment and horses and everything, and real actors!" She was forever reading about them in her movie magazines.

Her blue eyes were shining and her cheeks all pink, and she tossed that lively yellow hair. Regular kid she was at times, for all her seventeen years, yet old enough to be a wife. Her mother was, at that age. And meantime she teased me near crazy. Whether she knew it, I wasn't sure.

Her ma, who never said much, spoke up now from the sink. She had a sort of whiney voice that matched her stringy hair and tired ways.

"Looks like we might see something besides land and beasts—for a few weeks, anyhow." Then, like she'd said too much, she glanced at Rose's pa and bent back to her dishwashing.

"What did you expect," the old man growled, "when you married a farmer?" Then to Rose, like always, laying down the law, "Don't let me catch you wasting time over to Kelham's, making a fool of yourself with that fancy-pants Daryl Rogue. Actors! Hogwash!"

She knew better than to answer him back, but her color, always changeable, flared up quick, and my insides did a buck jump. This Rogue, I decided, was well named, whoever he was.

"How come you seen 'em so soon?" I asked her.

She'd turned sulky, which made her prettier 'n ever. "They drove down our road," she said, "to ask was there anyone around handy with horses and such. They specially said—" she looked mischievous now, and I wanted to shake her—"a good strong country boy."

That was enough for me. It was too late to go to Kelham's then, but I aimed to ride over first thing tomorrow.

I don't believe in a whole lot of words, so I nodded, picked up my hat, and walked out. Rose knew darn well I'd wait for her on the porch, but she didn't come out to say good night, though I fussed a long while unhobbling Pussyfoot before mounting.

RIDING OFF, I said to Pussy, "Ain't it funny how pure ornery a filly can act! One minute broke, the next wilder'n if she'd never been haltered."

Answering my spur, she dropped down to the creek that ran between our two ranches, and crossed on my bridge. Bridge? Well, it was a fallen redwood that spanned the gulch, twenty foot or so. A shifty horse could find footing on it, for the rider, the trick was not to look down. With only a sliver of moon, it was dark and smelled wet under the big old bays, but we knew every inch of the trail.

After we'd crossed and started climbing, I caught glimpses of the lights back down at Rose's; then a blaze of lights at Kelham's. The three places made a perfect triangle, each about a mile apart.

Reaching my barn, I watered Pussy, bedded her down and took a last look at the other horses. Then I turned in at my shack.

Cinch only a bachelor would live in the dump, that had been the tool shed of our home. When the house burned, my folks moved away. They'd wanted to take me along, but I balked. Partly Rose held me, partly it was my mountainside. In the end, my dad staked me what he could, and said join him if time come I couldn't make a go on my own. Now that time looked due. Unless—

Kelham's, I thought, tomorrow. Bright and early.

But doggone if next morning I didn't have a sick horse. Not too sick, but him being one of my boarders, I couldn't leave. It scorched me not getting to Kelham's, for meantime they might contact some other fellow hereabouts. But I kept busy all day. One thing, I never been unfriendly to work.

Late afternoon my patient quit frettin'

and took to his feed. By evening I reckoned I could safely be gone a couple hours, so I shaved and cleaned up. Mighty plain picture, my mirror showed. Plain blue eyes, hair-colored hair, sun-tanned hide. But good muscles, at least, six foot high of 'em.

Whistling, I threw the tack on Pussy and jogged off along the country road.

Long before I got there, I could hear the racket—voices and laughing and music. That old tumbledown house had never seen so much commotion in old man Kelham's day, and had been dead too ever since.

Rounding the last bend, Pussy hesitated, snorting under her breath. I shook her up. All they could say was no, so I found the hitchrack, tied her, and knocked on the door. I don't know who opened it, for the first person I saw inside was Rose.

MY EYES about fell out. Rose, in a twirly skirt, high heels, and a blouse I'd never seen—for good reason. She looked different and beautiful; older. And holding her hand was this character Daryl Rogue.

I didn't know his name then, but it wouldn't of mattered, for this gang called everyone "darling."

Rose turned sheepish when she saw me, but she made me acquainted. The women crowded round and started kidding, some wearing them play pants and carrying a drink. The men wore slacks and fancy shirts, and half of them dark glasses. But they treated me swell, and I had to like 'em—all but Rogue.

He was handsome, I'll grant, and well built in a slight way. Good dancer, someone said, and talented. But he looked second-handed—bags under the eyes, hands a mite unsteady. He'd been around too long. And what his dark look and crooked smile were doing to Rose—say, one drink for me, there'd of been a fight.

And she was taking it all, flashing her own eyes and her dimple, and coloring up. Where she'd learned this act beat me! I felt awkward as hell. My hands were too big, my spurs too noisy, my levis corny.

But Mr. Goldson, the director, was willing to talk business. Any help I could give he'd pay for by the hour.

"Chiefly," he said, "I'd like you to show me the country. We need a spot for a special scene, a scene with great drama. Daryl's riding cross-country to alert the town that bandits are going to hold up the bank. The route he takes is dangerous, but he's got to make time. Then he comes to this place where any man with less guts would turn back— And of course we want scenery. It must be sensational. You know—" he waved his hands—"trees, cliffs, waterfalls. Get it?"

But I was studying how Rose followed every word. No foolin', Rogue was a real-life hero to her.

Goldson's voice snapped me back. "Can't you talk, son?" and one of the women giggled, "He's cute."

Then Rose broke in.

"I know! Oh Mr. Goldson, I know exactly." She whirled on me. "Your bridge, Jim! Your redwood crossing."

But I couldn't answer. My bridge . . . Well, it was *mine*. Personal, say. A secret shortcut only Rose and I knew about. And here she was giving it away!

At that point my glance met Rogue's. No, I thought, damned if I'll give it. This'll cost 'em.

"I'll take you there tomorrow. My time'll be a dollar an hour."

Goldson never spooked at the price, but he had to know if this bridge was dangerous enough to suit his purpose.

"It ain't dangerous," I explained, "only *looks* dangerous. At my end it rests on this little rock— balancing, like, so you'd think a man could blow it off. I don't know. I never tried. Likely it's there for eternity, but it *looks* chancy."

"That's it exactly," Goldson said, and he set the time for ten next morning.

I turned to Rose. "Come on now. It's late."

"What's your hurry, good-looking?" one of the girls coaxed me, and another, "You're wasted out here in the sticks."

Rogue shrugged like he was getting restive.

Now that kind of foolishness I never dealt with, and it made me nervous. I give Rose the high sign again.

It was like dragging a kid from a picnic. Her eyes went from me to Rogue. I stood my ground. He waited, smiling his special way that made him out a pretty nice guy—to some. But it was Rose he smiled at. Me he looked through like a window. And it was her he spoke to.

"I'm rather afraid for my car on your road. So if your friend has his, perhaps you'd better—"

Pronto, I walked her out. Lucky we'd taught Pussy to carry double.

ROSE TOOK the saddle, skirts and all, and I swung on behind. We rode quietly a long time, she huffy and me downright unhappy. At last I had to say something. "What did your pa think, you going to that shindig tonight?"

Her shoulders twitched. "If you want to know, I went just to—to show him!" She half turned and her hair, sweet-smelling, brushed my face. "Oh, Jim, I have to get out now and then! I don't want to be like Ma!"

No, I didn't want that either; not for her. A rancher's wife had no fun, only work, work, work. But Rose, I thought, there's other things besides fun. You're growing up, sweetheart.

One round arm gleamed white as she gestured, and starlight picked out her little gold earrings.

"It was so gay and glamorous; everyone was so lovely! And you should have heard Daryl—Mr. Rogue—play the guitar! Spanish songs, Mexican, everything—just marvelous! He's been everywhere and done everything. It was all so exciting!" Sighing, she leaned back against me.

My voice come out husky. "So it's exritement you want?"

I slid one arm round her, and with the other tried to turn her shoulders.

But some devil got in her. She laughed and clapped her heels to Pussy. The mare jumped. I grabbed the cantle and swore. So laughing, galloping and cussing, we reached her house. In a flash she slipped off and away, and I had to head home, feeling like a damn fool—but also feeling awful close to heaven. . . .

I had my coffee on and eggs frying next morning at sunup, for I didn't aim to neglect my own work before hiring out. By ten o'clock my boarders had been fed and worked, stalls mucked out, fence mended, firewood cut, cow and chickens tended and my shack swept out.

Waiting then, I gave myself a treat, fancying up Pussy. When I got through she'd hurt your eyes. Plain as words, her little fox ears and soft dark look said thanks, but to make sure she nickered and shoved her muzzle into my hand. Velvet, against my big old paw.

Then here come my people in Rogue's shiny red convertible, hauling his horse. It was a chestnut gelding about Pussy's size, and they'd fixed him a high-head carriage, to look "spirited," with a bit like a bear trap, and put a "natural" curl in his mane. Far as I was concerned, anyone that rode him would still be afoot. Rogue himself was duded up in frontier pants, fringed jacket, loud boots and hunks of silver.

From my place down, Goldson and the cameramen, with their equipment, would have to walk, but it was only half a mile.

I mounted and led off, and I couldn't help saying to Rogue, behind me "Watch out for snakes."

He didn't answer, and turning, I saw his eyes were eating up Pussy. So I had to show off a little, and jumped her over a couple of down trees. She took them clean and willing.

Fact, anything I asked her she did willing, soon as she understood it wasn't beyond her.

When we come back to Rogue he said, real unconcerned, "Not a bad little mare, that."

I nearly laughed. I'd heard them words before; spoken 'em, too. They're the dealer's opening line, when he's underplaying what he wants. So this guy'd been in the horse business too . . . To Rose, a man who'd done everything was romantic. To me, oftener he was shiftless.

WELL, we reached my redwood bridge, prettiest spot a person could find anywhere. Goldson stood a long while studying how the sunlight mottled through the trees, how strands of Spanish moss swung gently, and buckeyes gleamed silver, and madrones a polished red. He stepped out on my bridge, stared at the churning water below and listened to the sound it made booming down the canyon. Deep green the pools were, and the riffles foam white.

He nodded several times, and I liked him when he said, "This is it. Definitely. Eh, Daryl?"

But Rogue had edged his horse over to ask me, "You actually ride across that redwood?"

"Easy as falling off a log."

"And it's not apt to slip off, just balanced on that little rock?"

"Never has. Course, there's a first time for everything."

At that moment Pussy started, staring downtrail. Rose had come in sight. Rogue said to one of the others, with a wink, "Watch this," and louder, "Here comes my girl."

Rose flushed. "Oh, Mr. Rogue!"

How should she know he wasn't on the level? She was innocent as a child, and reared nice.

But we all had to shut up, for Goldson was yelling and motioning at the cameramen, squinting at the scenery from every angle. "Now the cameras," he instructed Rogue, "will be the other end of the bridge. You ride straight across to them. Let's run through it. Okay?"

I thought Rogue's okay lacked heart, and no wonder. First time Pussy and I tried it we both like to died of fright. He was horseman enough to guess no horse strange to that redwood was likely to cross it.

It didn't take long to prove that. God couldn't of coaxed that sorrel across, and the longer Rogue fought him the balkier he got. If he'd used more brains and less brawn—but no. A dozen times Rogue whipped him almost to the point. Every time he whirled, snorting and trembling.

When both were lathered up and sizzling mad, Rogue quit. Above the water's voice he shouted, "It can't be done—it's suicide! This animal senses the damn thing's not safe!"

But Goldson wasn't easy licked. He snapped at me, "Will your mare cross?"

"Does, every day," I said.

"Then how about letting Daryl use her?" He saw my face and misunderstood. "Naturally we'll pay for her use," he added quick. "Both horses are the same size and color. With a good make-up job, nobody'll know the difference."

Me let that clown take my mare out there and maybe lose his head, throw her off balance and have her fall? I'd put too many long years of work into her, hard-earned savings, and a good piece of my heart, to see her crippled or killed. I said no.

"All right," he barks at me, "*you* ride her across. We'll have the cameras further back, different angle and so on. Maybe less light. Double for Daryl here, and I'll make it worth your while."

I about dropped dead.

But Rogue busted out arguing. It didn't set good with him, my stepping into his job. He griped I'd ruin the picture, and a lot more. He even good as claimed I was a liar, that no one could get any horse across.

In one motion I was off Pussy and up to Rogue. But Goldson guessed my mind. He told us, "That's all for today." Tomorrow they'd paint out Pussy's white stockings and her star. They'd give me some schooling. And to make things legal, I'd sign a waiver or some such.

Only a rich man can afford to fight when he pleased. Standing close, Rose squeezed my hand.

Now, I could almost see the nice little house I'd build. Could be she was seeing something of the same when she smiled good-by, giving me the benefit of her dimple.

"See you later," I said. "I'll ride down after work."

"You may see me too," Rogue told me, suddenly agreeable. "I haven't given up hope of crossing that bridge. I want to come over and study the thing quietly."

But I wasn't listening. Goldson's words rung in my head, "There's a constant need for good doubles." We were near enough Studio City so that in my off season, if we suited him this time, he might use Pussy and me again.

LATER, Rose's folks acted that pleased at my luck they was nearly skittish. Pushing back her gray hair, her ma kept repeating, "It's wonderful, Jim, just wonderful."

As to Rose, seemed it was more the thrill of it made her happy, rather than the money I'd make. I was trying to guess whether she knew I'd spent every cent for her.

She was wearing a blue dress of some summer stuff that sure agreed with her shape, and her hair had the prettiest lights, and her smile was sweeter than I'd ever seen it.

When I left, she followed me to the porch. In the starlit night, her voice was hushed, her face close to mine. A quarter moon rimmed the mountain. Honeysuckle scented the dark, and its heavy perfume, or maybe my crazy heart, or the blood beating—something, anyway, made me jump off the porch.

Rose called, "Don't come tomorrow, Jim. The folks'll be away. I had to tell Mr. Rogue that, too."

It was a rule of her pa's she couldn't have company when she was alone. The way I felt tonight, it was a smart rule.

I rode back toward home so groggy that Pussy near unloaded me when she shied at Rose's end of the bridge. I whipped out my flashlight to find why she'd startled. What I saw—or didn't see—I couldn't believe. There was no bridge!

I couldn't believe it, but I had to. My light's beam showed emptiness, nothing but emptiness, across the gulch. On the near bank the tree hung, pointing up into blackness and down into rushing water. And on my bank the little rock—the rock that had made it look chancy but might stand for eternity—had rolled away. After all these years, now, suddenly, it had slipped, and with it the tree. But there'd been no storm, no earthquake, no breath of wind.

I fooled around a long while, trying to play the light where the rock had been, not wanting to accept what had happened.

There was nothing for it but to backtrack to Rose's. I had to tell her our shortcut was ruined, and with it my chance to work for Goldson. I was sick. My hope of earning extra was all gone.

The telling hurt. It like to thrown her parents, me losing the doubling job. Rose took it hardest, not the money part, but my not having the excitement of acting.

After a spell her pa said I ought to go, since I still had to see Goldson, and Rose said sadly, "Without the bridge any more it'll take you a lot longer to get home. Hard as you work, you shouldn't try to come every night."

THAT WAS a miserable ride to Kelhams. And the news I brought them they already knew. It was Rogue's doing!

"I was looking around," he said, "feeling the thing out. I had one foot against the small rock, and braced myself to look down into the water. I must have lost my balance —I made a grab—I don't know, but I guess my whole weight was thrown against the rock from just the angle that would loosen it."

He paused. The others had heard his story and didn't say much, but I found it hard to swallow.

I only said, "That rock's been there maybe centuries . . ."

"So what? There's a first time for everything."

"So . . . it's funny, is all." No use to say it stunk.

"You know, Jim," Goldson put in, "it may have been a lucky break for you. Suppose it had happened while you were riding across?"

He was right, but that didn't make me feel any better. Might as well come to the point. I cleared my throat.

"Mr. Goldson, I don't guess you'll be needing me tomorrow."

He looked downright sorry. No one said a word, till suddenly Rogue snapped his fingers.

"W-a-i-t a minute!" There was something about his smile, the way he shoved his hands in his pockets, the way he looked me over— "You were eager enough to double for me before," he says. "Why not now? Anyone with a horse that can jump like yours— We all saw her jump today, didn't we?"

I didn't get it, and I didn't like his tone. But words don't come easy to me. I waited.

"So why don't you simply jump the gulch?"

Jump the gulch! Was he serious? I said, "Do I look crazy?"

He pretended to study that. "It's not crazy to take a small chance for big pay."

Was the man that jealous he wanted me smashed up? And jealous of his job—or of Rose?

But I was fed up. I turned to go.

"Wait, Jim!" Goldson said. "Listen. Is it really impossible? For, say, five hundred dollars? Can't you use five hundred? Think what a picture it'd make!"

I opened the door. "I'm thinking," I said. "And I'm seein' the picture— me and Pussy with our necks broke. Much obliged. Oh, and being you ask, I could of used the five hundred."

I closed the door. Outside, night lay cold over the world. Stars were very far away, and a small unfriendly breeze motioned the trees. I went slowly to Pussy and laid my hand on her reins. For a minute too I laid my face against her neck, in the dark, and the cool, and the lonely.

NEXT DAY I worked hard and fast enough to fool my horses into thinking there was two of me. I wanted to be alone, so that when Rogue's red car drove in, in late afternoon, I was put out.

Seems Goldson had come to proposition me again.

"Won't you change your mind, Jim, about trying the gulch? We've hunted all day for another such site, but there's nothing that can touch it. Listen, I'll double the ante."

"Mr. Goldson," I said, "I'd be real obliged to do it—for you and me both. Why, I not only never seen a thousand dollars, but I never seen anyone that has! But you can't ask a horse to jump twenty foot, downhill, with rough footing, and no run at it account of trees. She might make it, but if she doesn't—see what I mean?"

He saw, but still he pressed.

"You said your mare would do anything for you."

"Sure, after she's done it once and found it's okay. But there's no way to practice this. I don't mind being a gambler, but not a corpse."

But all this talk was making me restive. I had something in mind, something that had been nudging me all day. I had to go look again at where my bridge had been.

It was crowding seven o'clock when I rode through the woods and reached the place. I tied Pussy and stepped to the brink. There was the gap, all of twenty foot. Twenty foot over fast water, steep banks, jagged rocks. Could a horse make it?

I paced back and forth, testing the footing, eying distance, measuring take-off. Then I turned and looked straight up my mountainside where you'd have to start your run for it. Awful steep it was, and wooded thick. Facing the gulch again, I looked across where you'd land. Another steep pitch, with bushes, stumps, trees. Broken bones or worse—if you got over. If you didn't, the best horse on God's earth dead, and you—so long, world. So long, Rose.

I couldn't do it. It wasn't all being scared, though that too. It was also that killing myself didn't make sense; yet neither did turning down a thousand bucks, or, come to that, ten bucks. . . .

I rode back up to my place, but at the top I threw Pussy's reins over a laurel branch and sunk down against its trunk. My brains still hung around the bridge like hawks over a coop.

Sitting there, my eyes traveled straight across the canyon to Rose's. Like a toy farm they lay—house, barn and buildings, clear in the evening light. Her dog's bark reached me distinct, even the slam of a door.

Suddenly, behind me, Pussy stirred. I turned to see her staring across the valley. Her eyes were following what I hadn't noticed—a car. It was winding down the road from Kelham's to Rose's.

Something jarred inside me and I felt the pulse start to beat heavy in my throat. I stood, as if I could see better that way. Rose was alone, I knew. And the car was red.

It snaked slowly in and out of sight along the curves. When it drew up at the house I could see it clear. It was Rogue's all right—and he knew Rose was alone.

A FIGURE left the car and disappeared into the house. Silence hung so long and so loud that I jumped when a jay screeched, flashing blue through the green. My eyes ached; I was stiff with the strain of staring. Soon it'd be dark. Already sunset colored the mountain and painted the scene I watched a cruel, hellish red.

Sweat broke out on me and I begun to swear. Then more silence, more waiting. Suddenly my hair rose like a growling dog's. From over there a sound come. A scream.

There wasn't but one thing to do. I thought of unsaddling—a horn in the chest or belly can gut a man, but there was no time.

Next thing we were tearing through the trees, dodging branches, leaping stumps and brush, down, down, down. Like a nightmare, like the woods was on fire, everything flashed by red—trees, rocks, bushes.

All at once we dropped into shadow. Ahead, the earth was split, black, wide and deep. The noise of roaring, boiling water filled the world. In it, reaching for us, were the vicious rocks.

Under me Pussy faltered. I spurred both sides, I yelled at her, but speed tore the words away. I dropped the reins, and lying low, grabbed with both hands for her mane. The gulch rushed at us. It's coming. Here it comes now—now!

Last thing I knew was her ears pricked sharp, her body bunched for the spring, and all hell below. Then the saddlehorn caught my breast bone.

I come to, drunk, the mare still under me heaving and struggling. Pain was knifing my chest. Trees rocked past, streaks of sky zigzagged, everything dipped and rose. Which way was I facing?

That damn water seemed to pour through my head.

I had to make an effort to help Pussy. She was laboring hard—but laboring, it come to me then—up the far slope. We'd made it! We'd made it!

Winded, she floundered on, fighting for breath and footing. My hat was gone. Blood wet my face where a limb had struck me.

Up again into the light, purple now. There was the house, but all I could hear was gasping and a pounding heart, whether mine or Pussy's I didn't know.

At the porch I flung off. I cleared the steps, tore open the door and landed in the kitchen. Rogue's face swum at me, open-mouthed. He smelled of liquor. Then I saw Rose. She had backed into a corner, she was pale as snow, crying, but—all right.

But one thing I'd been dying to do, and I done it. He dropped real docile.

"Play dead," I says to him, and I went to Rose.

"Oh Jim," she cried, "Oh, thank goodness! But—but look at you!"

"What's wrong?" I grinned. "Don't I look romantic?"

"Oh, your poor face!" she bawled.

I told her, "It's a long ways from my heart."

But there was no call *she* should be, and a moment later I knew for sure how her hair felt like cornsilk, how small her waist was, and soft her lips.

Things got so interesting that for a spell I forgot a big item: Pussy could jump the gulch. She'd done it once, in a hurry, almost in the dark. She'd do it again, for Goldson, for our house—which she did.

I hustled out to check on her. She was all right, and still friends.

BAD Year,

Steve had never met any girl as exciting as Fay

BAD Time

By FRANK P. CASTLE

ABEL ROBARD counted money into Steve Danby's hand, slowly. He must be feeling pain with each dollar he has to pay, Steve thought bitterly.

What he thought must have shown plainly. "What's the matter?" Robard said. "Isn't the amount correct?"

Sure it was correct. But it wasn't right—or decent. Not for a solid month of brutal work in the tangles and wild country of the Chimayo breaks, hunting out the cattle running there, working them down to lower country, penning them in upper Pipestem Valley.

Thirty dollars for that, though it wasn't what he was getting; he had been required to supply his own grub, and Robard was deducting the amount Steve owed him for his meager rations.

Oh, he had agreed to it. But he hadn't known then what it would entail, in grueling dawn-to-dark work; he hadn't known how rough and dangerous that Chimayo country was. But Abel Robard must have known, he told himself. Steve now was certain the man had driven a mercilessly hard bargain at his expense.

Robard said, "A fair job. You have my thanks."

Thanks! Steve could not trust himself to speak. He wheeled and stalked out of Robard's store.

The main street of Pipestem, this Arizona town named for a valley and a river which was now a bed of white sand, was obscured by dust. It was blowing hard, a wind bearing the scorched odor of long drought. Lois Willing at her endless job of trying to keep the porch of Robard's store swept clean, said, "Hello, Steve."

He glanced at her, a girl with whom he had exchanged many casual greetings, never giving her any particular thought. Lois was a county ward, her care assumed by Robard and his wife four years ago when she was fifteen, after her folks had died in the big freeze of '81. And just another way, Steve thought, for Robard to squeeze a few pennies; she was an unpaid clerk.

He returned the girl's greeting and stood a moment, wondering what he would do now. He owned a few dollars, the clothes he wore, shabby saddle gear and a buckskin gelding. Also two sections of lower valley grass, south of town.

THEY SAID rustling was an easy way to make money,

but to Steve Danby no job had ever seemed so hard . . . .

STEVE DANBY had put in five years of backbreaking work, developing those sections, and giving them up would hurt. But the creek that watered the grass was long dry. With a little help he might hang on—but who in this town would help him?

Nobody, he told himself morosely, and supposed he would become just another homeless, jobless rider drifting across Arizona.

Lois Willing spoke again: "Steve, please don't think hard of Uncle Abel. These are tough times for him, too; he's carrying half the county on credit, barely keeping the store open."

Steve snorted. "Lois, you sure surprise me, taking up for him. He makes you drudge here, every minute of daylight—and for what? Robard treats everybody the same, squeezes them for all he can get out of them, you most of all!"

Sudden color showed in the girl's face. It became her. "Steve Danby, you're a knot-headed fool!" she flared. "At least a dozen men begging for work every day, at any wage; Uncle Abel gives you a chance to work, has to scrape for the dollars to pay you, and you turn bitter! And—drudge? You know what would have happened to me if the Robards hadn't taken me in? I'd have had nowhere at all to go!"

She caught herself, biting her lip. Steve was dourly amused at the thought of Robard having to scrape up those few dollars. He growled, "Knot-headed fool, am I? It's sure interesting to learn that!"

Lois put out her hand hastily, in a pleading gesture, starting to speak again, but Steve stepped down from the porch, leaving her. He started toward his horse, paused, then headed on across the street to the Ace-Deuce. He hadn't put his foot on a brass rail in months; with cash in his pocket there was no reason why he shouldn't grant himself that indulgence.

At the saloon's swinging doors something impelled him to glance back. Lois Willing was watching from the store porch, a small, oddly forlorn-looking figure.

A few idlers were inside. Steve said, "Beer—and set them up for the others."

The saloon loafers came hurriedly to the bar, grinning, slapping his back. Foolish extravagance, sure—but a man could go crazy thinking about his troubles; he had to blow off steam some way.

A man chuckled at Steve's elbow. "Danby, I always admired your style! Too many whimpering old women in this country, just because times are a little tough; you've got the guts and the backbone to say the hell with it!"

He was a fellow named Jud Leeper whom Steve had noticed around Pipestem occasionally; he wore flashy gear and seemed to have money. And he had never before appeared aware of Steve Danby at all.

"Forget the hogwash that passes as beer in this dump," Leeper went on. "I've got a bottle of bourbon at my table in back. Come along and we'll split it."

Steve went with him. Why not? Being treated with deference by anybody was a novelty—and even more so when it came from a man who seemed to have mastered the difficult trick of staying prosperous when about everybody else was going broke.

AT THE shadowy, moderately cool rear of the saloon he had a small shock. A woman was sitting there, a somewhat full-blown blonde, quite handsome. Pipestem looked askance at women in saloons. But this, Leeper told Steve, was Fay Burnett, of Tucson, where such a practice was regarded differently. There people thought nothing of it.

The woman smiled warmly at Steve. She didn't seem aware of his worn and dusty clothes, the rough dark stubble on his long jaw, and she chatted easily, laughed frequently, squeezed Steve's arm appreciatively when he tried a small joke.

Two fingers of bourbon put a pleasant, relaxed feeling in him. He felt disappointment when Fay Burnett consulted a watch pinned to her shapely bosom. "Getting late. I must return to the hotel."

Jud Leeper chuckled. "Steve, don't take it so hard!" he said. "You'll see her again. Matter of fact, why don't we all have din-

ner together. *Bueno* with you, Fay?"

"I'd love it!" she said, with a parting smile for Steve.

Fay left by the Ace-Deuce's side entrance. "She works for a lawyer at Tucson, came up here to check a land title for him," Leeper confided to Steve. "And sure took a shine to you, too! That's all right with me; Fay isn't my type."

Steve said wryly, "No use my getting interested in her!"

Leeper pursed his mouth sympathetically. "Things going rough for you? Well, now—might throw a little business your way—"

Steve leaned forward eagerly. "What kind of business?"

"It goes like this: There's a packing house at Bisbee that'll buy beef any time, paying a straight fifteen bucks a head for whatever's brought in—and it doesn't bother a seller with questions or ask for bills of sale."

Steve shook his head. "I haven't got any beef, Leeper—sold the last of my stock for lack of water, six months ago."

"Call me Jud," the other said. And added softly, "What about the cattle you chousted out of the Chimayo for old tight-fist Robard?"

Steve felt shock. He didn't reply, couldn't think for a moment of anything to say.

"I'd figure you put about three hundred head in the upper valley for him," Leeper went on quickly. "Right guess?"

Wrong guess. It was somewhat more than three hundred head.

"Look," Leeper said, "you've tried playing the game according to the laws set up by the likes of Robard, and what has it gotten you? The toes are damned near out of your boots! Me, I live high, hit the bright lights when I feel like it, carry a fat roll and always put the best of everything on my back. You could live that way, too!"

"Now, wait—" Steve began.

"No, you hear me out. Nearly five thousand bucks on an even split, you and me. An easy drive through the hills to Bisbee and you'd have a nice chunk of cash to spend on Fay in Tucson! But that's a big valley, with a lot of canyons—"

He paused, suggestively. Steve had penned Robard's cattle in a spur canyon with precipitous walls, had woven a tight brush fence to hold them there. There was a little water in the canyon; they'd make out until fall, when prices might be up and Robard could sell the cattle, that he had taken on a defaulted note, without a big loss. And a lot of canyons seamed the Chimayo hills; a man might hunt for a month without finding the right one.

Steve said, throat dry, "The two of us couldn't handle a drive of that size to Bisbee, Jud."

Leeper chuckled. "Who said we'd try? I've got a couple of punchers lined up to lend us a hand."

"But—you said a two-way split—"

The other showed a wicked grin. "Easy to forget about them, once we make delivery. Think it over. I'll see you at the hotel."

STEVE spent some more of his money, for a new shirt and pair of levis—cuffed outside so they hid his worn boots. Also he bought a barbershop shave.

Dinner at the hotel dining room was enjoyable for him, after a month living on fatback, soda biscuits and canned tomatoes in the hills. Jud Leeper genially insisted on paying, producing an impressive wad of bills. He did not again mention his proposition. And Fay Burnett showed Steve a friendliness, an interest in all he had to say, that made everything seem brighter to him.

At the end of the meal Leeper left them. The woman readily agreed to a stroll. She and Steve walked up the street and back again, her hand on his arm. It was a sultry night of lowering, barren clouds, but she didn't seem to mind. He certainly didn't—he was too acutely aware of her occasionally brushing against him, of a musky scent that tantalized his nostrils.

"I was getting bored, Steve," Fay confided. "A small town like this—not knowing anybody— Oh, Jud, of course, but he's only an acquaintance, and we don't have much in common. I feel that you and I are old friends already."

As he said a reluctant good-night on the

hotel porch she added, "I'll be leaving soon. And—you don't belong here, Steve. Come to Tucson! I'll be hoping for that."

He turned away, stepping a little high, to encounter Lois Willing. She studied him from worried brown eyes.

Steve, I saw you and that woman—"

"So?" he said.

"I know it's n-none of my business, but I'm afraid for you."

He frowned at her. "Go on back to the store, Lois. There's still time for you to grab another dime of trade for Robard."

The girl stood her ground. "Steve, I just don't understand. Something must be wrong. A woman like that—the clothes she wears, the money she spends . . . and you . . ."

He felt hot blood in his face. "First I'm a knot-head, and now I'm somebody no woman would be interested in!"

"I didn't mean that!" Lois cried. "And I—I'm terribly sorry I called you a knot-head. If you can't see what I do mean—Oh, g-go ahead and make a fool of yourself!"

She left him, running, and stumbled and fell while starting to cross the street. Steve went quickly to help her up. Lois slapped his hand away. She was weeping. She ran on, leaving him standing there.

Steve bedded down at the Star stable for the night and lay long awake, Lois' words still in his head. He rose late to another sultry day, washed at a water trough, and started, through habit, toward Robard's store to pick up cheese and crackers for breakfast. He caught himself just in time. He wasn't going to spend another cent with that tightfist, or give Lois another chance to downrate him.

Then he saw that the store was closed. This puzzled him. Robard generally opened at the crack of dawn.

He turned north, toward the courthouse, feeling a little queasy but bound he was going to find out if Fay Burnett really was checking land titles.

It was closed, also. Not until he heard the cracked bell of the town church ringing did he realize this was Sunday; he had lost all track of the days.

THE courthouse janitor was sunning himself on the steps. In answer to Steve's question he said sure, a blonde woman had been in several times to pore over county land plats.

He headed back along the street, heard his name called and saw Jud Leeper, with two other men, idling in an auction corral. Steve walked slowly to join them.

"Meet Poley and Keech, the punchers I was telling you about," Leeper said. "They're ready to go to work and so am I. You made up your mind yet to throw in with us?"

The punchers nodded meagerly, without speaking. They were a tough-looking pair and both packed guns.

Steve was tempted to say sure, he would throw in. Maybe Leeper was right, that men like Robard made the laws and used them to squeeze the life out of men like him. Why not live high, if only for a while?

He heard himself say, "Give me a little more time, Jud."

"How long does a man need to decide he wants a bucketful of cash dumped in his lap?" Leeper demanded, eyes abruptly hot and angry. Then he caught himself. "Sure, boy, think about it some more. But not too long; we got another deal on the fire. Decide and make it quick."

Steve left them, slanting across the street toward the hotel. He saw Lois Willing on the far walk. She was church bound, wearing her Sunday dress, something old and somewhat shabby in blue velvet.

And she wasn't alone. Pat Hegan, the county sheriff, was talking to her. Steve veered wide, pretending he didn't see them. Hegan called out and came hurriedly to intercept him.

"Steve, me and some others are worried about you and the company you're keeping," the sheriff said. "Those three you were just talking to . . . I haven't a thing right now I can pick them up on, but they've got long, crooked records. Don't know what they're hatching, but I'm certain it's no good. Don't know that woman at the hotel, either, but she's tied in with them, some way. Stay clear of them all!"

Steve felt the hot rush of blood to his face again.

So Lois had done some more talking, to this star-hung busybody.

"Speaking of business, how about keeping your nose out of mine?" he said thinly. "This town doesn't give a damn about me!"

"You're wrong," Hegan said, putting a hand on his arm.

"Steve, these are bad times, sure. But I've seen worse; I've learned a man can cinch his belt tight and get through them. And you have friends who are thinking hard about some way to lend you a hand until you can work your own grass again like you used to."

"Like Robard, maybe?" Steve said bitterly. That cheap pay-off would never stop choking his craw.

"Why, yes—" Hegan began. Steve shook off his hand.

"Like hell!" he said. "Maybe a smart man makes his own good times. I'm going to find out!"

He went on toward the hotel, walking fast. Lois started to speak; he ignored her.

Fay Burnett was standing by the lobby desk. She wore a long duster over her dress, and she gave Steve a warm, pleased smile. "I found my work here is finished, so I'm checking out before I have to pay another day's rent on my room. I'll leave on the two o'clock stage." She reached for Steve's arm. "You can take me to breakfast."

IN THE dining room, he ordered recklessly. When he finished paying the check he would be almost down to small change. They dallied long at a corner table; Fay talked about Tucson and its gay life. "I'm looking forward to seeing you there, Steve. You're too smart to stay in a dreary town like this, punching cattle for cheap pay!"

He nodded. "Tough life, all right." Across the street he saw Lois Willing walking alone, head down. Church must be out. The sight of her gave him an odd twinge. He turned his attention back to Fay, remembering reluctantly what Lois had told him last night, and Pat Hegan this morning. Steve cleared his throat. "You said good-bye to Jud Leeper yet?"

Fay frowned. "I told you, Steve, Jud is just an acquaintance, somebody I ran into here who helped pass the time. I doubt that I'll see him before I leave. There's nothing to keep you from coming to Tucson, is there? I mean—you had a job, rounding up cattle or something, but it's finished?"

"Yes. Worked a month in upper Pipestem, putting some beef on canyon graze, but that's done. I'm footloose."

Fay murmured, "I saw a map of the upper valley at the courthouse. There are dozens of those canyons, but some have such odd names—Lost Squaw, Two Smoke, Mule Ear—"

Was there a sudden probing sharpness in her eyes as she watched him, a tautness in her body? Steve wasn't sure. But he

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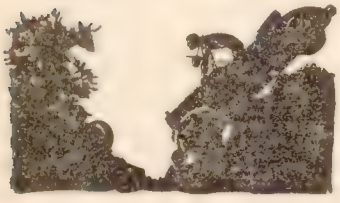
Give Me Back My Horse and Saddle



By LIMERICK LUKE

A cowpuncher on the G Bar,
Who tried punching cattle by car,
Stuck in an arroyo—
Which just goes to show you
Such things can be carried too far!

---

abruptly saw a way he could prove Lois and Hegan all wrong, settle the doubts they had put in his head. And if things went the way he was sure they would, he might be in Tucson soon, too.

"All those names mean something—like Hangtree Canyon, where a rustler was lynched," Steve told the woman. "I've spent a lot of time in Hangtree lately—" He caught himself.

"Really?" she said. "Steve, would you signal the waitress for more coffee, please?"

The stage was on time, and Fay Burnett got aboard. Steve was watching, back in a recessed doorway across the street. He had been there for an hour, after alleging that he had some business to handle and telling Fay good-bye.

Now he felt both relieved and somewhat ashamed of himself. Fay had been in the lobby, in plain sight, that whole hour. She hadn't spoken to anyone. Certainly not to Jud Leeper, who hadn't showed at all.

He had to give Leeper an answer, and the thought of Tucson, of seeing Fay again with his pockets lined, had a powerful pull. Still, the decision to put a crooked loop in his rope came hard. Steve left the doorway and started slowly down the walk.

Some people were in the street, excitedly discussing the thick clouds that again filled the sky, hoping the break of the long drought was due. Only another false hope, Steve thought; there had been many such days, for months.

He looked for Leeper, without result, and presently again ran into Lois Willing. She was using both hands to snug her skirt against a rising wind that rioted in her brown hair.

STEVE said coldly, "You shadowing me, or just hunting somebody else, like Hegan, who'll throw another warning in my teeth about the company I keep?"

"Hegan? I didn't say a word to him about you!" Lois said. "And I'm not doing any shadowing, either. I—I came to tell you something—"

"About Fay Burnett, maybe?" And, as she bit her lip, mutely nodding, "You've said enough already. She just left town for Tucson. She invited me to call on her there, and maybe I will." A gust of anger was suddenly in him. "She had this town pegged right—it's cheap, sees a man on his knees, and yammers warnings at him to stay meek and starve! Well, the devil with such mealy-mouthed talk!"

Lois cut in, "She didn't leave town, Steve. She got out of the coach at the old dry ford, just beyond town. I was walking that way, trying to think of something to make you see things plain. Those three men you talked to this morning were waiting for her, with horses and a wagon; they all went off toward upper Pipestem."

Steve whirled and left her, running. Lois started to follow, crying for him to wait. He did not pause or look back.

LIGHTNING forked and thunder rumbled above the dark Chimayo hills. The wind that lashed gray sage and creosote bush here in this wide expanse of upper Pipestem valley held a breath of moisture.

Steve halted his buckskin a moment, looking through gloom like early twilight toward Hangtree Canyon nearby. He had driven his horse hard, getting here. Now he reined the animal up a hogback.

He had taken a .44 from his blanket roll, at the livery stable. It was thrust under his belt. When he heard a horse whinny, a sound shrill above the wall of the wind as he crested the hogback ridge, Steve lifted the gun and eared back its hammer.

The horse wickered again, in a hollow below; it was one of a wagon team, standing painfully on three legs. Then he glimpsed Fay Burnett, as he rode down the reverse slope. She was standing alone near a motte of stunted, tangled junipers, duster billowing. The woman turned toward him, face going pale, deep lines appearing in her cheeks.

Steve stopped, lowering his gun, oddly unable to feel much anger, she looked so strained and worn. "So you did tip them off?"

"Yes, though they'd have taken me off the stage anyway," Fay said wearily. "Pre-

tending to leave was part of my job—also filling your head with moonshine about Tucson, making you eager to throw in with Jud. I was glad you did tell me, because I'm so tired of seeing people hurt; they'd have beaten you, and worse, to get the name of that canyon if you had put them off any longer. I had checked county records, looking for land owned by Robard, and they had hunted through a dozen canyons, but we couldn't find those cattle. Steve, they never meant you to gain anything from this deal. Now get away before they come back! Run!"

Jud Leeper's voice cut in: "Drop that iron! Quick, damn you!"

The man's horse came crashing through the junipers. A gun in his fist lined at Steve, who slowly opened his hand and let the .44 go. Leeper swung his mount alongside the buckskin. "Had a hunch you might be along, so I waited and watched. And here you'll stay!"

"Jud, you promised me . . . no killing this time!" Fay cried.

Leeper curled a lip at her. "You know I never leave anybody behind to flap a loose lip!"

He swung his gun-weighted fist at Steve's face, a sudden blow that opened a gash and started blood flowing. "That's for taking your time about naming the canyon, saddle-tramp!" And, to the woman, "You're so tenderhearted, get back in those trees and change to your saddle britches while I'm dealing him out. We'll harness his horse in place of that hurt team nag, then join Poley and Keech, and start moving those cattle just before dark."

Steve lifted his hand to wipe the blood away from his mouth. In the same motion he lunged at Leeper, grabbing for the man's gun.

Leeper jerked back, slashing the barrel at him. Iron crunched into his shoulder and Steve pitched out of his saddle in a hard fall.

Thunder roared and rain came, driving hard. Steve rolled and twisted, trying to get away. Leeper chopped a shot that spouted dirt in Steve's face. A close miss; the next would nail him.

THEN a drum-roll of hooves sounded and a rider came down from the ridge at a wild run, careened recklessly into Leeper's mount, and both horses crashed down, squealing and kicking.

Leeper was thrown clear. Steve went for him—heedless of the thrashing animals in his way—took a hammering hoof against his thigh, staggered, but kept his feet. He hit Leeper in a headlong dive just as the man came erect, and slammed him flat again.

Steve slugged him in the face. The man's gun roared deafeningly in his ear. Steve grabbed for the weapon and battered Leeper's hand against the ground; Leeper cried out, dropping the iron. Then the man's fingers were at Steve's throat, digging in, clamping tight.

Steve jerked his head, breaking that grip. Leeper clawed at his eyes. Steve slugged him again and Leeper whimpered, going slack. Steve started to lift himself; Leeper kicked viciously, sending him reeling away. He threw out an arm for balance and something slapped his palm. It was a gun, his own, put there by a blurred figure glimpsed from the corner of his eye for only an instant through pelting rain. Not Fay Burnett—she was in front of him.

Then there was a wild whining about Steve's face, like angry yellowjackets, and he saw two shadowy riders up on the ridge, their powder fire streaking this gray afternoon as they tried hard for him. Poley and Keech were back. He knew what had brought them, knew with what hot anger they wanted to put their bullets into him.

But Steve swung back toward Leeper, saw him on his feet, digging a stub-barreled hideout weapon from under his coat. Steve slammed in one fast shot at Leeper, and turned his gun on those ridge riders. Three more shots and one lurched, spilling from saddle. More guns were roaring from somewhere and the other one ran.

Leeper was belly down, struggling weakly with both hands to lift his short-barreled gun. Steve moved quickly to kick it from his grasp. Leeper looked up at him, mouth working. "Everything tight in my fist—all those cattle waiting in Hangtree Canyon—

and a two-bit puncher took it away!"

He went limp and still, slumping forward in blood-spattered mud. Fay Burnett brushed past Steve, then settled down and lifted his head, cradling it against her breast.

Riders poured over the ridge and into the hollow. Pat Hegan leaped down. Abel Robard slowly dismounted. Somebody up on the ridge yelled, "You got that other one, Sheriff!"

Steve saw Lois Willing, talking fast to Robard. Still shadowing him, he thought. Then he looked for the rider who had driven that horse into Leeper's mount—someone he still didn't know—who had also put his gun back into his hand. And he saw no one—except Lois, dress muddy and torn, hair a damp cloud about her shoulders.

The knowledge that Lois was the one who had saved his hide left Steve shaken. He walked toward her.

Robard had his face tilted up. "Looks like this storm is blowing on south. But it's enough to tide us over. And just in time, for me. I was about to close my doors."

The truth of this was in his voice, his tired, seamed face. Steve felt shame, realizing how selfishly intent he had been on his own problems, how willfully blind to the troubles of others. "Abel, those thieves were after your cattle. And I nearly threw in with them."

"But you didn't! And you couldn't have, Steve!" Lois cried.

"Maybe not. I hope you're right," Steve said.

ROBARD said, "Queer place for them to come looking for that beef. What made them think the cattle were in Hangtree Canyon?"

Steve stood silent. Hegan joined them, frowning at Lois. "Girl, we nearly ruined some good horses, trying to catch up, after you tore out of town, yelling at us to follow along! Leeper's done for. A good thing, I'd say, for the woman's sake; she's his wife, and mighty sick of the life he led her." Then, curiously, "Abel, just where are your cattle?"

"In a spur off Two Squaw Canyon, a dozen miles on north," Robard answered. "Looks like Steve gave a wrong tip on purpose to trap them—and we'll let it go at that."

"No," Steve said. "I still hadn't made up my mind then whether I'd go for an easy steal; I was just trying to find out if there was some—tie-up—between Jud Leeper and Fay."

"And you came to stop them, when you knew the truth, even though you didn't have to!" Lois cried. Then her glance shifted to Fay Burnett and she bit her lip, turning away. Steve knew what she was thinking, that maybe it was concern for Fay that had brought him here.

And her first thought was right. He had come to stop them, not caring any longer about himself. All he felt now for Fay was pity.

He said, "Sheriff, Fay tried to warn me off. I'd appreciate it if you'd go easy on her." Hegan nodded, and Steve went on, "Suppose it would be easy enough now for me to clear out of here, move along, away from Pipestem. But you had it right—tough times can be outlasted, but not the way I almost picked. I'm cinching my belt plenty tight; I'm sticking, no matter what comes!"

Robard cleared his throat. "Steve, there ought to be some water now in that creek of yours. And your graze is better than anything in these canyons. Suppose you move my cattle there. I'll split the profit with you when we sell, come fall."

"Abel, thanks," Steve said unevenly. Then he went after Lois, stopping the girl with a hand touching her shoulder.

A queer thing, he thought, that a straight, sure track could be right under a man's nose and he should have such a hard time finding it. But a good thing there was so much time ahead for staying on it, now that he was certain where he was going.

"You were right—I've been a knothead," he said to Lois. "But I'll move those cattle south and work like sin to get ahead, if you'll be there with me."

Her eyes, glistening like stars, gave him his answer.

He grabbed his shotgun from its place by the bed

No Bargain in Blood

By W. G. Hawthorne

AS FRED BISHOP lay under the blankets, he watched a log settle in the fireplace, and saw the eerie shadows flicker against the log walls. He turned on his elbow to look at the window across the room. The panes were covered with hoar frost. The November coldness cramped the little two-room cabin with a frozen bitterness, and as Fred rested on his elbow he listened to the weird creak of the cabin walls.

Fred's wife, Susan, sighed softly and nestled her head against his heavily-muscled shoulder. Her warm fingers touched his calloused palm. "What's the matter, Fred," she asked, "can't you go to sleep?"

"I'm too happy," he said. "Four months ago, Susan, we were in Memphis, just married. We decided to come west—to free land and the promise of happiness. It was such a dream—"

"A good dream," she said.

TOM KANE was dying anyway . . . all Fred had to do was let the killers finish the job. . . .

"With our own house and a hundred and sixty acres of good land, we can prosper. In the spring, I'll plant wheat and potatoes—acres of potatoes. I talked with a homesteader in Cottonwood the other day. He says spuds are gonna be a money crop in these parts. I—"

Suddenly Susan pushed herself up in bed. "Fred!" she tensed. Listen!"

He cocked an ear as he watched the firelight flutter across her tight face. The wail of a coyote, coming from the mountains three miles back of the house, sounded on the blustery night.

"Just the wind," he said. "Probably the canvas flapping on our old conestoga wagon."

Her fingers gripped his forearm. "No, Fred," she said, "horses—running!"

He swung his stubby legs out of the bed, pulled on his overalls, slipped his feet into his boots, and clomped across to the window. Rubbing a spot of frost away with the heel of his hand, he peered through the small hole into the dark, cloudy night.

THEN he saw the darker shadows of two horsemen as they rode straight toward the house. About twenty feet from the little front porch the horses swerved toward the south. One of the horsemen pushed something off his horse, and it thudded like a sack of wheat as it hit the frozen ground. Then Fred watched the riders disappear into the cottonwood thicket a hundred yards south of the house.

"What—what is it?" Susan asked, sitting up in bed.

Fred couldn't answer at first. His heart was in his throat, and hot currents of fear shot along his nerves.

"Tell me!" Susan cried. "What is it?"

Then Fred heard the low moan, like somebody dying in pain. Emotion charged up to his throat and he swallowed sharply.

He lifted his mackinaw off a peg near the door, pulled the mack on, belted it, and buttoned it snugly under his chin. Then he grabbed up his shotgun from its place by the head of the bed and hurried outside to investigate.

As he rushed out into the cold night, the white fog of his breath steamed up around his head.

The hulk of shadow was lying a few feet from the porch. Fred bent down, struck a match, and cupped it in his hands over the constricted face.

Short gaspings for breath came from the dying man, and blood stained the front of his blue-checked shirt. The wind sucked out the match, but Fred had recognised the man.

"Tom Kane!" he mumbled, stupefied with fear. Suddenly he was so sick he could have vomited.

Tom Kane owned the biggest ranch in the Powder River country, and ran seven thousand head of cattle. Kane's ranchhouse was two miles to the east, across Pigeon Creek—the boundary line between Fred's land and Kane's.

During the late summer Fred had helped Kane with haying. Sometimes Susan had gone to the ranch with him and spent the day with Mrs. Kane. Although Tom Kane had often shown his hatred for other sodbusters in the valley, he had appeared to be good friends with the Bishops, had loaned them tools, given them advice about the Powder River climate and soil, and had treated Fred and Susan like real neighbors. Fred wanted to be friends with the Kanes, but he didn't like the attention Tom Kane was showing Susan.

A week ago Kane had given Susan a new dress. The homesteaders had said then, Fred remembered, that Kane was making a fool of him. Fred liked Kane and hadn't wanted to believe them.

Two days after Susan received the dress, a thousand head of Kane's cattle were stolen.

Kane accused the sodbusters and turned a cold shoulder on Fred. When Fred had next gone to the ranch to ask for a day's work, two of Kane's cowhands had all but chased him off the place.

Now he stood up, realizing the trouble he was in. He felt sure that whoever had stolen Kane's cattle had also dropped Kane in his yard—for dead. Everybody would readily draw the conclusion that Fred had killed him.

SUSAN called from the door. "Fred, where are you?"

He looked at her as she stood in the doorway. The soft curves of her body were sharply outlined by the light from the fireplace and from the lantern in her hand.

"Get dressed, Susan," he said urgently, "and ride to Cottonwood. Get the doctor and the sheriff. This man is dying!"

"Get him in out of the cold. He'll freeze."

"Hurry!" he pleaded. "Can't take a chance on moving him. If he dies, Susan, I'm in for it!"

"Who is it, Fred?"

He dreaded telling her. Then she pulled a coat around her shoulders and came out into the yard with the lantern. He met her, but she pushed around him, and he said quickly, "It's Kane."

"Tom Kane!" she said, one hand moving swiftly to her throat.

"Yes—hurry, Susan! Get the doctor. I'll keep watch."

"Watch?"

"We're—I'm on the spot, Susan. Kane was dropped here for a reason—to make it look like I killed him. If we can get the doctor before—"

"Oh, Fred!" she cried, giving him the lantern, and then she dashed back toward the house. "Get a horse ready," she called. "while I dress."

With the lantern swinging in his hand he ran around the north corner of the house and headed for the squat little barn. His two horses—which had pulled the Conestoga all the way from Independence, Missouri—whinnied as he opened the door. Quickly he bridled and saddled one of the horses and led him out of the barn.

Susan, dressed in boots and riding trousers, met him at the porch. She buttoned Fred's overcoat around her and then swung into the saddle. In a moment the horse was pounding southward through the thicket, heading for Cottonwood, three miles away. He didn't want to send her on the ride alone, but he felt that she would be safe. Whoever had dropped Kane here couldn't afford to molest Susan. If they intercepted her or killed her, that would be definite proof that Fred was innocent.

The sound of Susan's horse, drumming along the frozen trail, was growing faint when Fred heard the sound of other horses. He tightened up, but thought to blow out the lantern. The hoofbeats had come from the cottonwood thicket. Nervously, shotgun readied, Fred moved around to the south of the house and stopped against the front wheel of the Conestoga. He sucked air into his lungs, held it, and tried to catch the sound again. He couldn't see anything, or hear anything except the bluster of the cold wind and the low, painful moan of Tom Kane dying. Then he made out two shadows against the dark sky where the ground, east of the thicket, rose to a kind of high knoll. The two horsemen were heading toward Kane's. Slightly relieved, Fred let the compressed air out of his lungs and began breathing normally again.

Now Fred became aware of the bitter cold. His ears stung as though they had been frostbitten, and his fingers ached. He thought of the nice pleasant fire glowing in the fireplace. If he could go inside just a few minutes—but Tom Kane! If Kane didn't die before Susan got back with the doctor, he would contract pneumonia. Fred knew that Kane should be moved, but the vision of Kane dying in his arms sent shivers of horror down his back.

HE FOUND the lantern again, lighted it, and set it beside Kane's face. The man on the ground wasn't gasping any more. His face held the expression of cold death. Suddenly, Fred was on his knees at the rancher's side, feeling his pulse. He didn't seem to have any pulse. Hysteria clawed at Fred's heart.

He lifted Kane into a sitting position, then raised him to his feet. With Kane bobbling like a rubber man, Fred slid around in front of him and let him drape across his shoulder. Then Fred staggered across the porch and on into the house. He eased the bleeding man down on the bed. Kane started a low moan but a gasp cut it off as the life seemed to go out of him. Fred knew he had done the wrong thing by bringing Kane into the house. The exer-

tion had probably brought his death.

Fred pulled the covers up over Kane and tucked them around his shoulders, and then he went back out into the yard and got the lantern. He came back in, closed the door, blew out the lantern, and set it down on the floor beneath the coat pegs.

He slumped wearily across the room to the fireplace and stood there thinking, staring at the fire. He asked himself, why would those horsemen dump Kane in my yard? Maybe there was more between Susan and Kane than he knew, although he had suspected that Kane's intentions weren't altogether neighborly. Maybe Kane wanted Susan for himself. Maybe the horsemen knew that. Homesteaders in the valley had said as much. Maybe if Kane died—if he wasn't dead already—both homesteaders and ranchers would think he had killed Kane for revenge. He was sure they would think it. The sheriff would think it, too. Maybe if. . . .

He was still staring into the fireplace when the clatter of hoofs came to him on the blustery wind. He picked up his shotgun again and waited inside the door. If the killers were returning—then he heard Susan's voice calling to a fellow rider.

When he opened the door she and Dr. Lyndon were dismounting in front of the porch.

"Where's Tom Kane?" Susan asked, breathing rapidly.

"Inside," Fred said. "He would've frozen out here."

As Dr. Lyndon grunted disapproval for moving Kane, Fred led the way into the house, lighted the kerosene lamp, and placed it on a chair by the bed for the doctor to work by.

Dr. Lyndon pulled the covers down and saw the blood on Kane's chest. "Hot water," he said, feeling Kane's pulse.

"Have to heat some," Fred said.

Susan stared at him. "At least you could've had water heated."

The note of anger in her voice dug at Fred's heart. He said, "Maybe I had a reason for not heating water."

His words caused her to stop. She looked at him, disbelief in her eyes. Then she went for the teakettle, filled it with water from a pail near the door into the back room, and hung the teakettle on a hook inside the fireplace. They couldn't afford a wood-burning stove yet.

After a moment Fred said, "Did you get word to the sheriff?"

"He was out on a raid somewhere," she explained, "but I left word for him to come as soon as he got back."

FRED knelt down in front of the fireplace, stirred the logs into flame, and then watched Susan go to the bed to help the doctor with Kane.

The eight-day clock on the mantle was striking twelve when the doctor began gathering up his instruments. When he was ready to leave he turned to Fred.

"Don't move him again," he warned. "You almost finished him."

Fred protested, "But it was so cold—"

"I know," the doctor said. "You probably kept him from getting pneumonia, but you took an awful chance. That bullet was very close to his heart."

Fred and Susan walked out on the porch with the doctor. When he was gone they turned back into the house.

Susan crossed to the bed and looked down into the unconscious man's quiet, angular face. He was breathing heavily, but with more ease now.

Fred picked up the lamp, blew out the light, and then walked across the room and set the lamp on the mantle beside the clock.

Susan said, "What'd you do that for?"

"Caution," he said, "against Kane's killers."

After a moment Susan came to stand beside Fred in front of the fire. "Fred," she asked quietly, "did you mean what you said—about not having the water ready? You sounded as if you wanted Tom to die."

He avoided her question. "You think a lot of Tom Kane, don't you, Susan?"

"Why, yes. He's—"

Fred cut in. "This is going to be nasty, Susan, whether Tom Kane dies or not. Kane's an important man in this valley. Somebody is going to pay for this. The

sheriff will see to that. Maybe I can prove Kane was shot and dumped in my yard, and maybe I can't. The two men who dumped him here are betting I can't. I think they're the men who've been rustling Kane's cattle. If they can make everybody, including the sheriff, think I killed him, the rustlers can run free. People are talking about you and Kane. They'll think I killed him for revenge. If Kane lives, of course—" Fred stopped, caught his breath, and then rushed across the room and picked up his gun.

"Don't go out of the yard, children!"

"Fred!" Susan cried. Terror was in her voice. "Did you hear something?"

"Horses," he said.

Tensed, he crossed quietly to the window. He rubbed away the frost again, peered out into the darkness, saw nothing but a wall of black. Susan started across the room toward him. A stick of wood slid down in the fireplace. Fear tingled Fred's spine. Susan started to scream, but muffled the sound by clamping her hands over her mouth. Fred said, "Don't see anybody, but I know I heard horses."

"Maybe it's the sheriff," she said.

"If it were you'd know it," Fred said. "He wants the world to know when he's doing a job. No, Susan. Somebody suspects Kane isn't dead. They're coming to finish the job. They've got to make sure he dies. If he lives—" A horse nickered off toward the cottonwood thicket.

SUSAN had heard, too. They stood side by side now, paralized with fear, listening. The tick-tocking of the clock suddenly seemed to be a violent booming. The wind made a scurrying noise against the outside walls. Fred strained his ears, trying to detect the sound of footsteps on the frozen earth.

He tiptoed to the door, then stopped, wondering if the back-room door to the woodshed were fastened. He was sure it was, but wished that he had checked. Now he lifted the latch on the living-room door, eased it open about four inches, and peered out. Somebody was coming silently across the porch toward him. Fred couldn't identify the man, but he levelled the shotgun on the dim outline of the man's body.

"Get your hands up!" Fred barked.

The man stiffened in his tracks. "Don't kill me!" he begged. "Don't shoot!"

"Get 'em up, I said!" Fred snapped, and the sound of his own voice sent a chill along his arms. He saw the outline of the man's hands as they reached above his head. Fred said to Susan, "Light the lamp while I keep this bird covered."

When the light glowed up in the room, Fred pushed the door open with his booted toe. The light fell across the big man's scarred face, and Fred saw the burning expression of hate in the giant's pale eyes. Then Fred recognized him—Red Cassiday, one of Kane's cowhands.

"Red Cassiday!" Fred said.

Coming up behind Fred, Susan said, "He's got a gun!"

"Drop it, Cassiday!" Fred bellowed.

The gun thudded against the porch floor and Cassiday said, "I didn't come here looking for trouble, Bishop."

"What are you looking for?" Fred snapped.

"Well," he stalled for words, "I was riding in from Cottonwood and met the doc. He said somebody shot my boss here at your place. I just wanted to see him."

"He's dead," Fred said sarcastically, "and you're lying, Cassiday. I wondered

what the scheme was when you and your pardner ordered me off the ranch the other day. Now I know. You wanted to get it started that Kane had it in for me. Maybe he has, but you and your pardner aren't as cunning as you think. Where is that varmint who rode through my yard with you earlier? Call him in before I blast your guts out."

"You got me all wrong, Bishop," Cassiday said.

"Have I?" Fred said, and then motioned to Susan, "Hold this gun on him while I get his revolver. If he tries anything, blow him to Kingdom Come."

He shifted the shotgun into Susan's trembling hands. She stood in the doorway, while Fred stepped to Cassiday's right and picked up the 44-40 Remington. When Fred straightened up, he checked to see that the gun was loaded and then jabbed the barrel against Cassiday's spine.

"Now call your pardner," Fred said, "before my finger slips."

"Hey, Slick," Cassiday called through cupped hands. "Come on out. This fool'll kill me."

Susan screamed. Fred's guts turned over, fear bristled the hair on the back of his neck, and his heart was a hammer pounding his ribs. Slick Gillis, another Kane cowhand, stood behind Susan in the doorway, and he had a gun against her back. Gillis's face was like a coyote's, with satanic eyes, lean cheeks, and lean jaws. Fred cussed himself for not checking that back door. Because of that mental slip, somebody was going to die—maybe Susan, and then Tom Kane.

TAKE it easy, sis," Gillis was saying. "Gimme that shotgun and don't try to act up."

Susan surrendered the gun. Gillis set it inside the door and said to Cassiday, "If that back door had been fastened, you'd be a dead rabbit. They're a smooth bunch of homesteaders. We thought they were in bed, and they were waiting for us."

Fred said, "You can't get away with this deal." His words were empty and unconvincing. He knew it was a futile attempt at bluffing. Of course, if Gillis killed Susan, he could kill Cassiday in return. The thought left him sick—Susan's life for Cassiday's!

"We have nothing against you," Cassiday said. "We just wanna see the boss."

"To kill him—is that what you want?" Fred asked.

"Look, Bishop," Cassiday reasoned. "Kane wants your wife. Now, he came here, invaded the privacy of your home, insulted your wife, and you called his hand. He drew on you. You had to kill him in self defense. That would make reason with a court."

Fred's palm was sweating on the handle of the Remington. He looked past Cassiday at the crooked coyote face of Gillis. He knew what Cassiday wanted—and what he was determined to get, one way or another—and Fred had no hope of stopping him. All he could do now was to bluff and stall for time.

"I don't get it," he said.

"It's this way," Cassiday said. "Kane wants your wife. The whole valley knows it—"

"Go easy on that angle," Fred warned, "or I'll drill you." Too late, he knew he'd said the wrong thing.

"Listen to him talk," Gillis guffawed, "and me with a gun in his wife's back. He wants to be a widower."

Cassiday said, "Why're you so anxious to help out Kane? I know Kane. If he lives, he means to have your wife, or he'll—"

"Spill the story," Gillis said. "Then if he doesn't want it that way, we'll do it our own way. That sheriff has been hot on us all night. We've got to get to the bunkhouse before he starts checking there."

Fred listened for the sound of horses, but the night was a blustery turmoil of wind and clouds. He knew he had stalled as long as he could.

"I've got money on me, Bishop," Cassiday said. "Big money, because Slick and me've just made a haul from a thousand head of Kane's cattle. I'll give you five hundred just to let me see the boss for one minute."

"That's no dough," Fred said, still try-

ing to stall. He was desperate to do something, but there was nothing to do except try to play them along, and hope that the sheriff would come. That, he knew, was a futile hope.

"A thousand bucks?" Cassiday asked.

"Nope," Fred said. "Bid again."

"This is my last offer," Cassiday said. "Two thousand. Take it or leave it."

FRED looked at Susan. She was crying. Emotion choked him and he wanted to cry himself, but when he saw the diabolical look in Gillis's eyes, saw the nervous twitch of the rustler's lips and the jumpy shifting of his feet, Fred knew his little game of stalling had reached the end.

"How about it, Bishop?" Cassiday asked. "Two thousand is a lot of money. Think what you could do with that much money. Think what you could do with that much money on this sandy strip of land. You could fix up real nice. Even buy Mrs. Bishop some nice dresses. You—"

"You double-crossing—" Susan began.

"Shut up!" Gillis barked, and Susan cried brokenly.

The sound of her voice drove a wedge of pain into Fred's heart. He wanted to kill Gillis, but he couldn't. He couldn't do anything.

"Two thousand dollars?" Fred asked.

"That's right," Cassiday agreed. "You'd have to grow an awful lot of potatoes to get the start that would give you—work your fingernails to the bone, fight mortgages. Is it a deal?"

"Susan," Fred said, trying to make his act sound convincing, "two thousand bucks is a lot of money."

"Oh, Fred!" she cried. "You couldn't! You wouldn't let that man go in there—to kill Tom Kane! Don't let them fool you with that business about Tom and me. The dress was a gift. Tom Kane's got to live, Fred! It's your only chance. Kane will tell the sheriff how he was shot. You won't even be a suspect. Tom is a good man, Fred. I couldn't stand to live with you if you let these men kill him. I—"

"Cut it, sister!" Gillis shook her.

"Susan Bishop!" Fred said. "I've had enough of your talk about Kane! When I didn't put that teakettle on, you might have

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known what was coming! I can't stand my wife seeing another man, accepting gifts from him, causing people to talk behind my back. Two thousand bucks look pretty good to me."

"Fred!" she begged, hysterical.

Cassiday was excited. Gillis smiled triumphantly. Fred was in deep now, and his mind grasped frantically at Susan's desperation. It was a long shot, with little chance of success—but his only chance. He hated a trick like this, but if he could build Susan up to the breaking point, it might—

"This is a blood deal," Fred said. "I want to go along with you, but, Cassiday, two thousand isn't enough. I want to be cut in. I want as much as you and Gillis. If I'm going to be a pardner in killing Kane, I want in on the big money. I'm sick of drudging my life away. I came here all the way from Tennessee hoping to find freedom, and what do I find—sand and wind and backbreaking labor. You heard my wife. She won't live with me if I don't save Tom Kane. You know why? Because if Kane's dead, she can't make love to him."

"It's not so, Fred!" Susan sobbed. "It's not so!"

"Cut the sob stuff," Fred said roughly, staring past Cassiday into Susan's frantic eyes. "If you can play games with Kane, then I can play a bigger game with Cassiday and Gillis."

"Now you're talking sense," Cassiday said.

NOW, listen, Cassiday," Fred said, appearing to drive a hard bargain, "how much do I get for letting you kill Kane?"

"Kane's on the rocks," Cassiday explained. "We've stolen enough cattle from him in the last four years to buy his place. He's had to mortgage heavy. He won't be able to pay off this fall. With him dead, we'll pay the note, take the ranch, and we're on top—and, Bishop, you're in equal, a third."

"On paper," Fred said coldly. "I'm not taking chances."

He looked at Susan. If she didn't break now, he knew he was a goner. He'd been in many a close jam in his life, but this was his first time to be a pardner to the murder of an innocent man.

"Yes, on paper," Cassiday said.

"No!" Susan pleaded. "No, no, Fred!" she screamed. Suddenly she lunged out of Gillis's grasp, stumbled, went down on her knees.

Fred triggered the Remington. Gillis groaned. His gun exploded—intended for Susan—but he was going down, and the bullet buried in the porch floor. Gillis was dead.

"Now, Cassiday," Fred breathed, "we'll wait for the sheriff."

"Oh, darling!" Susan cried, getting to her feet.

"There's a rope on the seat of the Conestoga," Fred said. "Get it, Susan. We'll tie this bird up." Then he shoved Cassiday past Gillis's body and prodded him into the house.

A FEW minutes later, as Fred and Susan waited for the sheriff, Susan stood beside Fred at the fireplace. She said, "You had me fooled, Fred, for a few minutes. I was sick and scared. You sounded so convincing about me and Tom Kane and the teakettle."

Fred smiled. "I just didn't think about putting the teakettle on, Susan. As for you and Kane, maybe I was a little jealous, but not that much. How'd you know I was bluffing?"

"You said you hated our place here," she grinned. "I knew you loved it. You hadn't been able to go to sleep for thinking about it."

"You bet I love it. And we're going to grow the biggest spuds in Wyoming next year."

Fred slipped his arm around Susan's waist then, and turned his glance toward Tom Kane.

He saw the rising and falling of the covers on Kane's chest, and a glow of triumph flooded through Fred.

Jandango Jever

By Kenneth L. Sinclair

WHEN AN HONEST cowpoke takes to stealing horses and breaking jail, is it lunacy . . . or love?

THE girl with the smoke-gray eyes was a parcel, all right. Had to be, to look so fetching in dusty old levis and a shirt that was a couple of sizes too big. She looked tired, though, when she stopped her saddle horse at the edge of the ford and let him drink.

She was around twenty, pert and little and blonde. But the notions she got when she noticed Cleve Huntley's lank figure, sprawled on a grassy spot across the creek, were big and sudden.

What she did was gasp, cuff her old ruin of a hat back, and haul a sixgun out from the waistband of her levis.

No telling what might have happened—the jut of her tanned little jaw was purely warlike—if her horse hadn't spooked at the sudden movement. He snorted and pitched, kicking up showers of spray before he bucked himself right back up the bank. The girl, caught off balance, made a grab for the saddlehorn and missed. Then she sailed right out of the leather.

She landed with a thud in the dust

She landed with a thud, rolled over twice and then came up on hands and knees, feeling around frantically in the deep dust for the gun, which had gotten away from her.

The spray had soaked her face, and now the dust made streaks of mud on it. She looked so funny, all braced for war and missing her gun, that Cleve settled back and laughed.

Her eyes took a rigid bead on him. Slowly she got to her feet, muddy little fists jammed to slim hips. "Another decked-out hombre from Fandango," she observed scornfully. "Whatever pried you away from the honkytonk—run out of money?"

"Nope. The gals all got to fighting over who was to dance with me next. So I pulled out before somebody got killed."

"I'll just bet! I—" She bit her lip and looked down, feeling around in the dust with the toe of a boot. "Doggone it, that was Pa's gun. If I've lost it—"

"Is your old man a horsethief too?" Cleve asked dryly.

"Why, you duded-up doggoned—" She drew a big breath, but couldn't seem to get any more words past the sudden tightness of her lips. She looked so little and furious and forlorn that Cleve regretted that word he'd used.

So he got up, saying, "Couldn't help noticing those twenty horses you just drove across. The word says they were stolen last week, from some ranch to the north of here. Sheriff is looking for 'em."

"In the bottom of a bottle in One-Eye Barker's place? Why, that good-for-nothing Dan Kelson couldn't catch—" Suddenly she stopped and gave Cleve a long, searching look. What she saw wasn't likely to impress her much—six feet and some of cowboy, redheaded and medium lean, decked out in finery that hadn't settled to fit his frame as yet. But she went on, "Mister, I'm no horsethief. Pa isn't either. Understand?"

CLEVE rubbed a hand along his jaw. At twenty-six he'd been pounding saddles for a long time, and a cowboy learned to figure things out for himself, sometimes from mighty meager sign. For a girl who wasn't a horsethief this one had been prompt to draw iron at the mere sight of a stranger.

Didn't matter much to him, though, one way or the other. He tilted his head, listening, and then said, "Sounds like those horses are going away from here fast. Be hard for you to catch 'em again, regardless of whose they are. Being a gent, I just might round 'em up—"

"Huh!" The girl looked him over a second time, slowly, from shiny boots to fancy-striped pants to gaudy silk shirt and unstained Stetson. "A good-time hombre like you couldn't drop a loop on a fence-post!"

"So?" Cleve was easygoing, generally, but this girl's persistent scorn was enough to rile any man. Her saddle horse had trotted up the creek bank a ways and was looking back to see what she aimed to do about it. So Cleve stepped into his own saddle, shook out his catch rope, and rode up there.

He didn't know exactly why he was doing it. Man could get himself in bad trouble by dabbling with stolen horses. He'd just make her see that he wasn't one of the good-time Fandango hombres like she thought, and then he'd ride away from her, fast.

When he got back to the ford he was leading her horse. She took the loop off. She'd found the gun and had put it back under the band of her levis, but she didn't seem of a mind to use it now. She paused with foot in stirrup to watch Cleve as he coiled the rope.

"Mister," she told him, "you've got yourself a job. If you want it, that is. I'll need help catching those horses, and I'll need help driving them. It'll take about a week. I'll pay you ten dollars."

No feminine wheedling, no batting of eyes. A business deal, mister, take it or leave it. She was trying to act independent as all get-out. But there was a lost, little-girl look in her big gray eyes that said she needed help. Somebody said, "Might as well, seeing as how One-Eye's fargo game swallowed all my money."

That voice, it turned out, was Cleve's own. Something way back in his head was telling him that he ought to get out of this, pronto, but something else had taken complete charge of him. He didn't understand what it was, but it was enough to scare a man.

She swung lithely into her saddle. "Say," she remarked, "you *have* got rope burns on your hands, at that. What were you doing lolling around in Fandango?"

He sure wasn't going to tell her that he was the drab kind of hombre who'd stuck to the same job for five years, down on the Mogollon. That he'd saved his money because there'd been nothing else to do with it. And that sooner or later a young buck decided it was time to strike out and have some fun. What he said was, "Well, it seemed far enough from anywhere so a certain sheriff wouldn't come looking for me."

"Oh." Her voice seemed small and disappointed. She didn't say anything more, just kept looking at him. So he amended, "It just happened to be a lady sheriff, and me being such a handsome galoot, she—"

The girl's sudden laughter interrupted him. "What makes you tell such lies?" she demanded.

He grinned at her, brash as he could manage. "Why shucks, the plain old truth isn't generally interesting."

A COUPLE of hours after that, Cleve's gaudy silk shirt was dusty and brush-torn. His boots were scratched. His blood was coursing faster than it had in weeks; a little work, it seemed, was mighty good for a man. He and the girl had the horses rounded up and were driving them through a gap between low hills.

Her name, it turned out, was Amy Scott. She saw how Cleve was sizing up the horses, and she gave him a sidelong glance. "Say," she asked suddenly, "you aren't really on the dodge, are you? I mean, you haven't killed somebody?"

"Not lately," he told her solemnly. "There's just so much room on a gun for filing notches, anyhow."

"You're as crazy as Pa is!" This made the second time she'd laughed; it was a clear, bell-like sound that made a man feel good. Then she added in a small voice, "I supposed you've noticed something about those horses."

"Yup. All young, solid color, none over fifteen hands high. Somebody aimed to sell this bunch to the Army. All but that pot-gutted old gray over there!"

Amy laughed once more. "Pa says you always need one like that for the quartermaster to reject, else he'll turn back some of your good ones just to make it seem like he's doing a good job."

Cleve tilted his hat low over his eyes against the slant of the setting sun. "How come they got sold to that ranch they were stolen—I mean, the one you drove 'em away from?"

"That greenhorn rancher needed horses, I guess," Amy snapped. "And those lazy crooks in Fandango saw an easy way to make themselves some money." Looking straight ahead, she drew a deep breath and went on, "Mister, I'm going to tell you the whole thing. I drove 'em away from that ranch, all right. But it wasn't stealing. How can anybody steal his own property? I mean, they belong to Pa, and he's in jail, put there so he can't look after his own interests. He was driving them to Fort Tuttle when he made the mistake of going past Fandango. That crooked sheriff and his playmates jailed him on charges of beating and robbing Candelario Mendez, and helped themselves to his horses. Being too lazy to drive them to the fort, they sold them to the first sucker that came handy. But Pa sneaked a letter out of the jail and it reached me in El Paso where I was working, and I—"

"Slow down," Cleve advised. "You don't need to say it all on one breath! What were you aiming to do with the horses?"

"I've got to get them to the fort! Pa's got a contract with the Army and if the horses aren't delivered it'll be canceled or something. I've got to get the money for them, so I can hire a lawyer for Pa!"

Cleve whistled softly, thinking of the three hundred miles of rough, barren, most-

ly waterless country that lay between here and the fort. A mighty tough trip for a girl.

"You're thinking I'm telling you a tall one," she accused. "You don't think a sheriff would do such a thing. Well, you don't know the kind of sheriff they've got around here! Fancy Dan Kelson never even got elected, really. He and his bunch just moved in and shoved the old office-holders to one side and dared them to do something about it. And with the Territorial capital so far away—" She shrugged. "Well, they've been lolling around ever since, having themselves a good time and never doing any work and never running out of money. Where do you think they get it?"

CLEVE had done some wondering about that, during his brief stay in Fandango. The sheriff and his boys cut some fancy and expensive capers. But now Cleve straightened in his saddle, looking ahead witth narrowed eyes. "We're coming to something," he mentioned.

"That's the Mendez place," Amy said. "I'm staying with Doña Mendez. You see, her husband's in jail too, as witness against Pa." A figure appeared under a *ramada* at the ranch, and Amy waved a greeting.

Cleve shoved his hat back on his curly red hair. Amy's father was accused of beating and robbing a man, and here Amy had cottoned up to the hombre's wife. Farther a man got into this thing the crazier it became.

Doña Mendez was smaller, even, than Amy. A wisp of a gray-haired lady, all primped and powdered, with a lace collar and a black dress. A man would think she was decked out for a stroll down the street in a city, but here she stood in a ranchyard with some chickens scratching in the dust nearby. One little brown hand lifted a single-action .45 from the folds of her skirt and centered it on Cleve.

Amy laughed nervously. "Put that away, Doña Mendez. He's all right, in spite of his fancy rigging. He's going to help us. His name is Cleve Huntley, and he—"

"I think he looks jus' like the hombres from Fandango. This one is not much for handsome, but maybe you 'ave listen to the big lies he tell, no?"

"Gosh, no!" Amy said frantically. "I mean, he tells 'em all right, but he's not very good at it and anybody can tell when—"

"If he go back an' tell the others you 'ave brought the horses here—" The hammer of the single-action clicked back. "I think it is bes' to shoot him now!"

"Doggone it, don't you dare!" Amy cried. "That fort's a long way away and we've got to have a man to help with the drive! He's not one of those crooks. I—I just know it!"

Doña Mendez's dark eyes lighted. The gun lifted higher. "So? Maybe he talk the pretty words, but I think—"

Cleve had bent a glance around toward the horses, and now he horned into the argument to mention, "Way them Army remounts are drifting off you might not have enough of 'em left to make any drive. Why don't we open 'em in that corral first and decide whether to shoot me afterward?"

The gun lowered, then disappeared from view. "Jus' like my Candelario would 'ave say it! Always he think of the work, not of himself." Doña Mendez made shooing motions. "Hurry, before the horses get away. W'en you are through I will 'ave ready the supper."

That meal wasn't much for grub, just eggs and beans and tortillas, but there was magic in it. Amy had scrubbed her face, put on a pink dress, and had done something to her hair. Man wouldn't have thought this could be the same girl who had gone rolling in the dust at the ford. In the candlelight this one was downright lovely.

Cleve didn't have much to say during the meal, partly because of an odd sort of lump that seemed to have lodged in his throat. The womenfolk talked about how they were going to hire a lawyer and upset Fancy Dan Kelson. Cleve got to thinking about the stretch of country between here and Fort Tuttle; sand, endless ridges of upended rock, deep dark canyons. If he were going to drive those horses through

he'd need help—at least one tough hombre who'd fight sandstorms and risk dangerous going, for nothing more than plain riding pay.

There wasn't any of that kind of help to be found in Fandango, where fancy-dressed hombres lolled around and vied with one another at faro and drinking and dancing.

SUPPOSE he did get the horses through to the Army buyer. What happened when the Army found out they'd been stolen from a ranch? Or could you call it stealing? Dan Kelson would, for sure. And he was the sheriff.

Cleve's brow furrowed. He'd gotten himself into a tangle this time. When he stole a glance toward Amy he knew blamed well that he wasn't going to back out of it, either. Wasn't going to let her take the risks on that desert trail.

When the meal was over Doña Mendez shooed Cleve and Amy out onto the porch. The horses were quiet in the corral, and a big round moon was lifting over the hills. Amy perched on the rail and looked at it. Cleve's Adam's apple bobbed a couple times, but he didn't get anything said; the lump in his throat was getting bigger all the time.

A subdued rattle of dishes came from the kitchen, barely audible through foot-thick adobe walls. Candelario Mendez had built solidly and well. The house was like a fort, with a thick door and plank window shutters that could be closed in case of sandstorms.

Seemed like no time at all before Doña Mendez finished her chore and came out to the porch. "Is very quiet out here," she said softly. "'Ave the hombre run out of the pretty lies, señorita?"

"I reckon he has!" Amy said; giving Cleve a look that was pure mischief.

He hankered to say something about the seriousness of bucking the law—even crooked law—and of driving horses across the high desert. Didn't get started, though. Doña Mendez said, "My Candelario always was the quiet one too, w'en he look at the moon. Now he is in the jail. Me, I 'ave try to get other hones' people on this range to do something about this thing that 'ave happen to our town. They write to the governor of the Territory, but there is no answer." She looked at Cleve. "This one, señorita, I think is *muy hombre.* Maybe you bes' not let him get away!"

"Shucks," Amy commented merrily, "I think the big long cowboy is just plain scared of women!"

She sure looked impish-pretty in the moonlight when she said that. Scared of her? Cleve's mouth opened to deny it, then sagged some more when he realized from the shaky feeling in his knees that something sure had him boogered. Best he could do was say hollowly, "I ain't either!" and stomp off to a shed to bed down for the night.

He didn't get much sleep, though. The chickens roosted in the shed, and kept making little crooning noises from time to time. Cleve's thoughts kept whirling from Amy Scott to stolen horses to the desert between here and Tuttle, and back to Amy again.

Along toward morning he gave up trying to sleep. He threw the saddle on his horse and headed toward Fandango, riding fast. The idea that had come to him was so simple that he wondered why he hadn't thought of it before. There were two hombres in Fandango who'd be glad to help him make that drive. Scott and Mendez!

All a man had to do was bust them out of jail. Cleve managed a grin, but it wavered some. He'd figured on a little harmless hell-raising when he struck out from his last job, and here he was tackling a chore of a different size.

WHEN he rode into Fandango it was just past sunup. One-Eye was locking the front door of his place, which had been a general store before it blossomed out as a honkytonk saloon and gambling palace. One-Eye was no early riser, so last night's jamboree must have broken up only a little while ago and he had just finished counting his money. His bald head lifted alertly, and he peered into the street as Cleve jogged past.

Cleve swung into an alley. Not being

familiar with the methods of jailbreaking, he paused to think a minute.

It had been easy enough to drop into the way of living in Fandango. Sleep till noon, then stroll out of the hotel and see what the swaggering, fancy-dressed hombres on the street were cooking up for the day's entertainment. Might be a horse race, a chicken pull, or whatever. Man could get a bet on anything, from the turn of a card to the time of day. Watch a fight, or get into one yourself, with plenty of onlookers, and money changing hands.

A good-time town, whose inhabitants would be pretty much asleep at this hour.

Cleve glanced down ruefully at his brush-tattered rigging and remembered how he'd bought the outfit to make folks take notice of him. Right now he didn't want to be noticed at all. And as far as he could figure, the only way to bust a jail was go ahead and bust it with whatever tools came handy. He dismounted and, easing through a stand of dry weeds, reached the little jail building. He peered through the single barred back window.

There was just one cell in the place, with a bunk on either side. In the middle, on an upended box, was a checkerboard. Cleve called cautiously, "Hey, in there!"

A little old codger with a pink face and a bristling gray mustache got out of one of the bunks. "Who in blazes are you?"

Cleve mentioned his name. "I reckon you're Mr. Scott. Well, I've come to pry you out of here."

Bushy white eyebrows lifted. "The heck you say. What kind of trick has Fancy Dan Kelson thought up this time?"

"No trick at all." Cleve glanced warily around. "And I haven't got all day to palaver, either!" Quickly he told Scott what had happened and what he planned to do. Scott looked at him shrewdly. "Darned if I don't believe there's one honest man in Fandango after all," he said.

Two minutes later Scott's cellmate, a Mexican whose portliness came naturally from Doña Mendez's good cooking, had been awakened. The two prisoners started pulling their clothing over their long underwear.

Cleve suddenly realized that he hadn't brought horses for them. He ran to the livery and returned in a few minutes with saddled mounts. Might as well make his sally into horsethieving a good one, he thought wryly.

Everything in Fandango seemed quiet as he looped his catch rope around the bars of the cell window, ran back to his horse and stepped up, taking a firm grip on the horn.

The horse lunged ahead, dancing sidewise in response to the rein. Cleve looked back as the rope tightened against his hip, and saw the sun-dried wood of the window frame splinter as the bars came free.

Sam Scott whooped, which wasn't wise, as he scrambled out.

As if in answer, a shout rang through the town. "Hey, Kelson! Wake up, everybody! That redheaded drifter is busting the jail!"

One-Eye Barker's voice. Even before its echoes died away, there was a scramble of activity at the hotel. Windows slammed up and doors banged open. Underwear-clad men crowded out onto the second-story gallery with guns in their hands.

Cleve didn't have to say anything to Scott and Mendez. They jumped into their saddles and followed him at a headlong run down the alley, bending low over the horns.

GUNS banged loudly against the morning stillness. Bullets wailed past the fleeing men. Cleve twisted around in his saddle and saw that the hombres up there on the gallery were yelling at each other—likely making bets on who'd down the fugitives.

For a sure thing, they'd have no compunction about shooting to kill. Cleve suspected they'd had considerable practice at it.

Be a waste of shells, though, to shoot back at them from the top of a galloping horse. He jammed his half-drawn gun back into the leather and bent around the corner of the blacksmith shop.

That gave the fleeing men temporary protection. By the time they had to swing away from it they were able to swerve be-

hind a knoll which gave them shelter for several hundred yards of travel. That put them beyond sixgun range.

Cleve lifted a hand, saw that it was shaking, and grabbed hold of his belt with it so others wouldn't notice. Neither of his companions had been struck by flying lead. Scott was a couple of shades whiter than he'd been before. Mendez smiled wanly and said, "Me, I don't like getting shot at!"

Sam Scott reined his horse close to Cleve's. "Pretty close squeeze, that one Where are we headed now?"

"It'll take those hombres a while to get clothes on their backs and horses under 'em. We'll get your horses and head for Tuttle."

"Will, hey?" Scott's eyes were the same smoky color as his daughter's, and could be just as bright with spirit. "Who are you to be dishing out the orders?"

Cleve grinned brashly. "I'm the hombre that's going to marry Amy, if she'll have me!"

"Are, hey?" Scott looked him up and down. "Maybe a redheaded hombre is what the Scott tribe needs, at that! I contracted to deliver those horses, all right, but what chance have we got to drive 'em fast enough so Kelson's bunch don't catch up with us? I got a notion you're crazy! Just the kind of rannihoo my daughter would—"

"The very same thing," Cleve remarked dryly, "as she said about you!"

Scott's mustache seemed to bristle. "Did, hey? I'll paddle her till she hollers!"

Cleve chuckled. "You'll have a time if you try that!"

It was midmorning when the three riders, topping blowing and sweated mounts, trailed into the yard of the Mendez place. Doña Mendez was fussing with her chickens. Amy was down by the corral Her slim back got mighty straight as Cleve, who was far in the lead, stepped from his saddle. She marched right up to him and said, "What did you think you were pulling off, sneaking away like that? I'll bet you all of a sudden remembered the honky-tonk girls—" Then she spotted Scott and Mendez. "I'll be doggoned!" she breathed. "How'd you do *that?*"

Cleve's chest swelled. The shakes were getting into his knees again, but he was determined to pay them no heed. He arched his neck and grinned at Amy Scott. "I'm liable to do most anything when I get riled." He grabbed Amy and kissed her. "Gal," he said, "me and your pa and Candelario have to light out of here fast, else Kelson and his boys'll catch up with us. But when I get back here there's going to be courting done. I got my eye on a place down on the Mogollon, good range that nobody's claimed. We could— I mean, you and me—"

The way Amy was looking up at him, soft red lips parted and eyes shining, stopped his breathing.

ABOUT that time Candelario Mendez, who had dismounted and gone running into the house, emerged with two rusty old revolvers and a sawed-off. That house, Cleve thought, must be an arsenal as well as a fort. "Señor," Mendez hollered to Cleve, "we mus' hurry! These two livery nags you got, they are no good for more fas' riding. Scott an' me, we change saddles to two of my 'orses! Then we outrun them outlaw!"

The two oldsters headed for the corral, lugging saddles. Cleve stared at them and wondered if he'd heard right. Outlaws? If that was an outlaw bunch it sure would by passing for a sheriff's posse about now. Man got kind of mixed up sometimes— maybe being in love helped that along.

"Oh, darn!" said Amy Scott. "I should never have gotten you into this mess, Cleve. Now, you've gone and busted a jail to get Pa and Candelario out, haven't you? Better hurry, then. And you be careful, you hear, when you get into those badlands. I want you back." Rising on tiptoe, she kissed him.

When Cleve got back on his horse and hurried to the corral he didn't know whether the pounding he heard was made by hoofs or his heart.

Candelario and Scott were letting down the gate poles, hazing the horses out. A few minutes later the drive was under way, with the remounts strung out in a line that

topped a hill. Cleve looked back and saw Amy and Doña Mendez standing in the ranchyard, waving good-by.

The drive didn't get far, though. It had gone only about a mile when there was a crashing sound of gunfire back at the ranch. Scott, Mendez, and Cleve yanked reins and looked at each other.

Cleve had a sudden all-gone feeling under his wishbone. Just like Amy, he thought, to cut loose at Kelson's bunch to delay their pursuit of the fugitives. Two women, alone against that bunch. And it had been Cleve's fool move that had led Kelson to the ranch. . . .

He yanked his horse around. "I'm going back," he said, touching spurs to his mount.

They all went back. Scott was on one side of Cleve and Mendez was on the other, their faces grim, when they raced up the last hill and looked down again at the ranch.

There had been more shooting during the agonizing minutes when they still couldn't see what was going on down there. Now they spotted the six fancy-dressed riders from Fandango, just dismounting in front of the house.

Amy and Doña Mendez were over at the well, a hundred yards on the far side of the house. They must have been drawing water, and had cut loose at the riders the minute they got in sight. But the range had been long, and there were no downed men lying around anywhere.

It had made them mad enough, though, to throw lead at women. Now Amy and Doña Mendez were hunched down behind the stone curbing of the well, both of them firing over the top of it now and then to keep the Fandango hombres annoyed.

Then Cleve saw something else. The lathered livery nags that Scott and Mendez had ridden out from town were now tied under the *ramada*. Somebody had thrown a pair of old saddles on them!

And Fancy Dan Kelson, a handsome, slab-faced hombre with sideburns, had gulped the bait. While chickens scattered from his path, he stomped toward the house, shouting for those inside to surrender. He'd taken the idea that his escaped prisoners had forted up in there, with their womenfolk to protect them. Cleve was willing to bet his bottom dollar that Amy had worked that whizzer.

CLEVE and his companions opened up. Kelson jumped like he'd been stung. Which wasn't likely, even though one of the booming reports had been made by Candelario's sawed-off shotgun; the range still was too long.

Put them on notice, though, that one of the fugitives possessed a weapon which would be lethal at closer range. Caught in the middle, the Fandango boys had guns pointed at them from the well on one side and from the hilltop on the other. They hunkered down and yelled for Kelson to do something.

He turned his head and spoke a command. They all made a run for cover, and the handiest cover was the house. The last man in slammed the heavy door behind him.

Cleve felt a chilling apprehension. Kelson's bunch had all the protection they needed now, and they could shoot through the windows and pick off their attackers. First thing to do about it was get Amy and Doña Mendez away from that well and to a place of safety.

Before he could do that, though, Amy proved that she had ideas of her own. She left the cover of the well curbing and darted right up to the house, reaching it before those inside had time to get themselves squared around. What she did was prop a heavy timber against the door. Then she ran around the house, keeping low and close to the wall, slamming the plank window shutters into place and bolting them.

Sam Scott whooped. When Cleve got his breath back he joined in, making it right gleeful when he heard muffled shouts of dismay and some banging noises from inside the house.

He raced ahead, hoping there were no knotholes in those shutters that would let a gun muzzle poke through, and swung close past the house, reaching down a long arm that clamped about Amy's waist. Lifting her up behind him, he backed his horse away from the house.

There were more banging noises inside there. The door shook under a heavy impact, but the prop didn't give an inch.

"Golly!" Cleve breathed. "Now we got a posse cooped up. What in blazes do we do with 'em?"

"Leave them there, you goose!" Amy breathed in his ear. "Till your lady-sheriff friend gets here to arrest them!"

Cleve got to what he considered a safe distance, then pulled his horse around. Candelario and Scott had ridden over to the well. Three other men, strangers to Cleve, had just ridden in and were talking to them. Cleve and Amy rode over there.

Only one of the strangers had dismounted. He was big and his bowler hat and townsman's rig were dusty. "Who might you be?" Cleve inquired, warily.

"Brady, Territorial marshal. Sent up here to investigate some charges that were made in letters sent to the capital. We were on our way to Fandango when we heard gunfire over here.

"Go to the other side of the house, boys," he continued. "Make sure nobody sneaks out of there. This may take a little time, but sooner or later Parlew'll decide to go along with us."

CLEVE was getting that mixed-up feeling again. "No hombre by that name in there, that I know of. Kelson, he's sheriff of—"

"That isn't his name," Brady interrupted. "From what Mendez was telling me just now, that's Brassy Parlew and his boys. Seems they did some loud bragging in Fandango while Mendez was in jail, and he listened to every word he could catch. They caught him while he was carrying some money he'd got from a beef sale, and robbed him, and had to put him in jail to keep him quiet. About that time Scott came along with his horses, so they charged him with robbing Mendez so they could get his horses.

"From the other jobs they bragged about, they're Parlew's bunch all right. They needed a good safe hideout between jobs, and what was safer than a place like Fandango? By pinning the star on himself, Parlew made it a sure thing. If there's six of them in that house we've likely got the whole Parlew gang snared. Considerable reward money ought to be coming to this young lady, seems to me."

Amy said, "Gosh!" and slid down from Cleve's horse. Everybody was smiling. Doña Mendez, Scott, Candelario—they all looked at Cleve and smiled like they expected him to do something or other.

Amy was looking up at him too. "Well, haven't you got any tall windy to tell about how you knew it was Parlew all along?"

Cleve admitted that he had none. Looking at Amy's soft, smiling lips, he was beginning to realize that the truth could be mighty interesting after all. He got down.

"I don't know any lady sheriff either," he said.

She wrinkled her nose at him. "Maybe I could get elected!"

Cleve summoned up a real good measure of brass, and grinned as he grabbed her. "Don't you bother about that!" he said.

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 42)

1. Sidewinder.

2. Extinct volcanic crater.

3. A blaze 8 to 12 inches long with a very short blaze a few inches above it, somewhat like an inverted exclamation point.

4. Washington.

5. No quarreling or wrangling.

6. Denver, Colorado.

7. The Shepherds.

8. Idaho.

9. (4) A quick toss of a sixshooter from one hand to the other and ready to shoot.

10. Cattle hump up in any kind of a storm that makes them cold, most of all in a blowing blizzard.

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

by Professor MARCUS MARI

THE HOROSCOPE OF A MAN OF VIRGO

ASTROLOGY often holds the clue to unfavorable as well as to admirable personality traits. Let's look, for instance, at the horoscope of a notorious Virgoan, Jesse Woodson James. Born on September 5, 1847, he developed the worst features of the Virgoan character—craftiness and cold-bloodedness.

Ideally, the Virgoan is a generous, easy-going individual with a calm and equable temperament. At the other extreme, he may be anxious for easy gains, and ruthless in achieving his aims. Jesse James was like this. He was able to carry out the bloodiest ventures with no visible signs of remorse.

Like many other Virgoans, he was quiet and cautious, keeping his head in a crisis. Taciturn, he seldom bragged or talked about himself. These ordinarily admirable traits in this case served as a shield for outlawry.

Had James not matured at the time of the bitter Kansas-Missouri border feud and the Civil War, it is possible that he might have lived the life of a peaceful, respected citizen.

As it was, his Virgoan characteristics—cleverness, coolness and imagination—found their outlet in a career of crime. This serves as a warning to the student of astrology; No matter how fine the qualities under a given sign may be, if the individual is not led by the influence and example of those around him into constructive channels, he may turn to an anti-social element to fulfill his destiny.

You may receive a personal reading by sending this coupon to Professor Mari in care of Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y. ENCLOSE STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE. (Canadians enclose three cents instead of stamp.)

Name..... Sex.....

Address .....

.....

Exact date of birth: Year..... Month..... Date of Month.....6-24-54

ON THE SUBJECT of cutting horses nobody writes more colorfully or more knowledgably than Thomas W. Allen, whose news and comments on the subject appear once in a while in the rodeo magazine *Hoofs and Horns.*

The old remark about "people who can't do things, write about them," doesn't apply to Allen. He owns several cutting horses and often wins with them. He's also a judge, an instructor, and the loudest-whooping fan in the stands on the few occasions when he's not involved in the contest himself.

Right now he's whooping it up for a little mare named Poco Lena, owned by Don Dodge, recent winner of the cutting events at Tucson, Ariz., and Sacramento, Calif.

The Tucson show was a real classic. There were 40 horses, all pointing their noses toward an $8,000 purse, including entry fees. After two go-rounds the field had been cut down to twelve of the greatest cutters in the country. Marion's Girl was in the lead with 288 points, Miss Texas had 287, and Poco Lena and Royal King were tied for third with 286. How close can you get? We'll let Allen tell it from here:

"The tension was really high, and it was anybody's show. The cattle were right, the sun was out all day and the usual wind was absent for the showdown finals.

Everyone clamored for front seats; the timers, judges and officials were all keyed up, the dogies were brought in, and all hell broke loose.

"Up to this point the best cutting performance by a single horse that I ever saw was by the great two time world champion Skeeter, at St. Paul, Ore., in 1950, when he had to lay down and lock horns with the cow to keep it from getting by. I had never expected that I would see another go-round with so much action.

"Well, chum, I did; and that little Poco Lena just naturally rubbed all the hair off her belly in putting on the greatest individual performance I have ever witnessed.

"So fast was the action that Don Dodge, as good a rider as you will ever see, and who has up to now been a total stranger to that saddle horn, had to latch onto that old apple but quick. And if it had not just happened to be in the right spot at the right time, Don would have taken up a homestead smack in the middle of the arena.

"They must have been feeding that second cow critter Don cut out on raw meat for a month, or else he was a cross between a kangeroo and the jumping frog of Calaveras County, because he made turns that were so blind fast that no horse could possibly stop him—but Poco Lena did!

"That little mare threw sand and rocks for 40 feet, but not once was she out of position and not once did she give ground—and if you ever saw a cow critter determined to join its cronies, that was one.

"Besides being fast, the action was sustained for a long time. When the whistle blew, Poco Lena had come up from behind and copped the prize."

According to Allen, the spectators went wild during this contest. He mentions especially Ma Hopkins, the publisher of *Hoofs and Horns,* and a beloved rodeo figure. He says, "She got so excited and hollered so loud and jumped so high that once she came down three seats away and landed in the lap of a sheepherder from Montana. We had to strap her down for the rest of the show."

From Tucson, Allen went to Sacramento, Calif. Unfortunately he and his wife Eva didn't go direct, but took a stopover at Las Vegas, Nev.

Allen wanted to find out how the roulette wheels worked, but he never did find out, even though he studied them quite a while. At least he never found out how to make them work for *him*.

But he got a chance to recoup some of his losses, because there was a Calcutta Pool on the cutting-horse contest at Sacramento. (This is like a regular betting pool, except that the ticket on each horse is auctioned to the highest bidder before the contest.)

Tom Allen, having seen Poco Lena at Tucson, picked and bought a ticket on her.

His confidence was justified, and now, he says, "his ponies can go back to eating hay instead of sawdust."

Like any honest fan of any good sport, Allen can see room for improvement. He thinks now that there should be amateur cutting-horse contests for novices, as well as the big professional ones. As things are now, riders who have horses well started on their training can't get any competition without bucking the top professionals.

There were a few amateurs entered at Tucson, for instance, but for each of them it was $125 in entry fee down the drain. If you happen to have that kind of money lying around loose because you can't get it into your wallet, you can enter the big shows for the experience. But not many youngsters with up-and-coming cutting horses can pay so dearly for practice.

Tom Allen has a good solution to this problem in the idea of a novice class with small entry fees and small purses. He thinks that the professional boys would be willing to donate their services as judges and officials for the good of the sport.

Since there's no spare time in most afternoon or evening programs, the amateur competition could be held in the morning. Allen seems to think that the average rodeo fan would not be interested in seeing any but the top horses. Personally, we disagree. We think the stands would be jammed up to see the novices too. There's nothing more fascinating than figuring which rookie might someday be a champion, and seeing the mistakes of the partly-trained cutters would make you appreciate the experts all the more.

Another advantage to a class for beginners is what it would mean to the future of cutting.

At the top the ranks are always being thinned. Horses, like people, get old or infirm, and sometimes the greatest cutting horses are sold to riders who are unable to keep them winning.

Cutting horse contests are becoming more and more popular, and there is a serious shortage of new competitors coming along.

Allen points out that the more encouragement that is given to newcomers, the quicker this shortage will be filled.

Tom Allen is a highly respected person in the cutting field and his suggestions are likely to be acted upon. One of his crusades has been to have the National Cutting Horse Association repeal the rule which prohibits the rein hand from touching the saddle horn.

Since the rider is practically only a passenger on his cutting horse's back, plenty of men (and women) who are not up to rodeo riding compete and win in cutting contests. The horseman is not allowed to cue his mount at all—not by reining or even by shifting his weight.

But often in a dodging, shifting duel between horse and cow (like the one Allen described above with Poco Lena) even a good rider needs some help to stay aboard.

Allen has therefore asked the NCHA to relax the rule as a help to older riders, to those who lack experience or have a physical disability. He figures you shouldn't have to ride like Casey Tibbs to enter a cutting-horse contest.

So that rule is likely to bite the dust any minute. Whatever Allen believes is pretty likely to be the best thing for cutting, and everyone in the sport seems to know it.

Adios,

THE EDITORS

"Don't move," Owen ordered

Blizzard Range

By Todhunter Ballard

THE STORY SO FAR: OWEN TOLLIVER, Box M foreman, determines to drive a herd through snowbound country to starving reservation Indians. When other ranchers refuse help, he takes Box M cattle, owned jointly by him and MARTHA MARTEL, his fiancee. She opposes the drive, hates him for forcing her to agree to it. He also forces banker BRYAN HALL to back him and says he intends to buy hay along the way. Forewarned, the ranchers hesitate to sell, and the truculence of PORINE, Box M rider, creates fights. Helped by the CANTWINE brothers, whom he distrusts, Tolliver gets through only to find the Indian messenger dead. Now he must summon the Indians to help break a path to the reservation. . . .

PART THREE

PORINE said, "That's the end of it." He had risen from his spot beside the fire as Tolliver came down the canyon, and listened quietly as Owen told of finding the Indian boy's body.

"We've got to get out of here."

Tolliver looked at the others. The old cook was huddled before the fire, wrapped in a blanket. Shorty was shivering. Only the Cantwines and the Mexican seemed unmoved by the news.

"We'd better butcher a steer," Porine said, "and take the sled. With good luck, we might reach Brady's."

Tolliver said, "I can't blame you. You all have taken more than any men should have to take. Get your horses and ride out. I think the cattle will hold in this meadow."

Porine said, "Sounds as if you weren't coming."

"I'm going to take the Indian's snowshoes and try to climb up over the ridge. If I can get to the top I can go on to the reservation for help."

Porine snorted. Tolliver ignored him. He moved over to the sled and made up a packet of dried beef, bread and coffee, then packed it in one of the kettles.

They watched him with sunken eyes. Porine swore hoarsely, "I never ran out on a man in my life, but that doesn't hold for fools. I'm going back down the trail."

Tolliver said, "You've already done more than I could expect. Kill a beef and get the sled loaded."

"I ain't going." It was the old cook.

Tolliver looked at him, the harsh lines of his face softening. "Go ahead. Porine is right."

"I'll stay." The cook was stubborn with the crankiness of age.

Tolliver knew the man, and realized the uselessness of argument. "Shorty, will you stay with the cook?"

Shorty nodded. Ray Cantwine surprised Tolliver by saying, "We'll stick."

OWEN looked at him, hardly believing his ears. Cantwine grinned. "Don't forget twenty of those cows are mine. I'll wait around until I get paid. So will Charley.

"I go." It was the Mexican. "She get too cold up top, I theenk." It was almost the first sentence he had uttered since the drive had begun.

Tolliver nodded. He reached into his pocket, pulled out two twenty-dollar gold pieces, and put them in the man's dirty hand.

"Any time you want to work for the Box M you're welcome." He turned to look at Shorty and the Cantwines. "If you haven't heard from me in three days, pull out. You'll know I'm not coming back."

"We'll hear from you," Cantwine told him, as Tolliver stooped and fastened on the snowshoes. "You'll get through. I'll bet on that." It was praise that Tolliver had not expected, and he flushed.

Porine said nothing. He was sullen, and Tolliver guessed that the man was through, that he would never return to the Box M. But he forgot Porine as soon as he began to climb the canyon wall. The slope was slippery and steep, and the snow had banked between the trees in drifts which were higher than his head. The snow was crusted, but not enough to support his weight without the webs; and, although the temperature was nearly zero, the exertion of the climb had him sweating beneath his heavy clothes.

Twice he slipped and fell. But he topped out finally, reaching the crest of the hogback which separated the pass from the smaller canyon to the west. Here he paused for breath, then broke off some dead branches and built his small fire, throwing snow into the kettle and adding a handful of coffee. Now that he was no longer moving the sweat within his clothes turned clammy. He shivered as he drank the scalding liquid.

Afterward he started along the ridge, moving with care. At times it was a thousand feet wide, at others so narrow that a slip in either direction would have sent him hurtling into one of the canyons.

He came to a break in the hogback and it took an hour to work around it. The sun had dropped from sight in the west and a new bank of clouds was building up to the north. Weariness swept over him in waves. His feet were made of unfeeling lead, so that each step was a separate effort.

Below him, somewhere to his right, was

the snow-filled Devil's Cut. Ahead was a heavy stand of timber. He came into the trees, thankful for their shelter, yet not daring to pause for fear that he might go to sleep.

He chewed on the dried meat until his jaws ached. He beat his gloved hands together. But he moved forward—slowly, very slowly now, feeling each tree in the darkness to tell him which was north. His great fear was of circling in the blackness. He moved on through what seemed endless hours, but finally the sky lightened in the east and he came slowly down off the ridge onto the irregular plateau. As the sun climbed he could see the reservation buildings in the distance.

The glare of the rising sun on the whiteness hurt his tired eyes, and he held them nearly closed as he moved slowly, doggedly, on.

Twice he realized that he was standing perfectly motionless, that he had been standing thus for some time although he had thought that his feet were moving. His mind played strange tricks. Once he fell and had great difficulty in rising. Afterwards he figured that it took him six hours to cover the four miles from the mouth of the pass to the reservation, but at the moment he no longer had a sense of time.

He was closer now, and someone must see him. Drowsiness rose up through him in waves. Then, suddenly, he was walking between the Indian quarters, walking on a cleared path, and there was a babble of excited voices. Then he fell.

EDWARD LORD was crying. He was a religious and well meaning man, for all his lack of ability and judgment. It was his wife who was competent, and it was the wife who worked the wet boots from Tolliver's feet and packed snow around them to draw out the frost.

Lord was standing by the chair. Through his tears he told Tolliver that he had prayed and that Tolliver's effort was an answer to those prayers. There was food on the reservation for less than a week. Afterwards he sent for the chief, and the old Indian came.

Owen Tolliver had no idea how old he really was. He had been older than Joe John, but he was still straight, still walking solidly, proudly.

"You are another Joe John," he said. "I knew he would send someone if he could not come himself."

Tolliver remembered then that Johnny Short Bear had not gotten home, that the chief did not know that Joe John was dead. He did not try to explain then. He saved his strength for what had to be said. He told of the cattle in the meadow below the Devil's Cut, of the thirty feet of snow in the pass. "You'll have to send your people after them."

He did not hear what the chief answered. The telling had taken the last of his strength. He did not know what they did until Cantwine told him the following afternoon.

Cantwine said, "You know how I feel about Indians, but I have to take my hat off to these warwhoops. They came waltzing down, three hundred of them, men and squaws. First they butchered twenty head and they ate as if they hadn't eaten for a year. They'd come down through the Cut on snowshoes and they beat quite a path, but not enough to get the cattle through. Next they gathered wood and built a whole chain of fires, up through the Cut. I thought first the darn fools expected to melt out all that snow, then I realized what they were doing. They burned the fires half the night. The snow the heat melted ran down into the stuff below, and froze solid as soon as the fires were out. That way they built a bridge of ice across that snow pack solid enough to drive the cattle over. We left the cook sled at the meadow and rode up here over the ice. The Indians—three hundred hungry workers—are bringing up the herd now."

Tolliver grinned faintly. Cantwine said, "You're a hero." His tone held its old trace of mockery. "I told them Joe John was dead and without you they would have starved. They think you're something special. They might even elect you chief."

Tolliver said, "The credit isn't all mine.

All of you who rode with me deserve a share. You puzzle me, Ray. Before this drive started you were the last man in the world I'd have picked for the job. Why does a man like you live as you do?"

FOR an instant a hot, intemperate look came into Cantwine's eyes. "Don't preach, friend Owen." He turned then and left the room. Tolliver stared at the closed door, then shrugged and, leaning back in his chair, went to sleep. When he roused an hour later the lamps were lit and it was snowing outside. He went to the window on his swollen feet and saw that it was still snowing. He wondered if the Indians had gotten the cattle safely through the Cut. They had. Edward Lord told him when he came in a few minutes later.

The agent's eyes were shining with real pride. "Those savages can really work when they put their minds to it."

Tolliver thought with surprise, he really loves the Indians. It's too bad he's so incompetent. They need guidance and authority. That's what Joe John had given the valley people. Joe John had been a natural leader. But he, Tolliver, had failed. He had attempted to lead, and had only succeeded in turning his former friends into enemies.

He turned and walked to the kitchen door as the agent's wife called them to the evening meal. They ate, and afterwards he slept. It seemed that he would never get his strenght back, never be rested again.

Outside it snowed, and then an ice storm struck them. It cleared, the sun shining for two days. Then came another ice storm, coating the snow with a hard crust which was strong enough to bear the weight of a horse.

And afterwards it was clear again, and his feet had shrunk until he could get into his boots. Edward Lord counted out the gold in payment for the herd. The stuff was heavy, nearly thirty pounds in weight.

Owen paid Cantwine for his twenty steers and divided the remainder into two packs, giving Shorty one to carry. Then they started for the pass on snowshoes, making no attempt to take the crippled horses with them.

Slowly they worked their way toward the distant ridge. It was very cold and the snow beneath their feet, as they crossed the flatlands, was a good six feet deep.

Before noon the old cook was beginning to fag out, and Tolliver helped him as they reached the pass and started downward across the snow-filled cut. Beneath the fresh snowfall it was glazed and as treacherous as a toboggan slide. The cook fell twice, despite Tolliver's efforts to help him, and the second time he twisted his leg until he could not walk.

Somehow, between them, they got him to the bottom, and improvised a sled out of some pine bows. On this they hauled him downward to the meadow where the sled had been left. Here they built a fire, dug out the sled, and got food from its box. Afterward Tolliver examined the cook's leg.

As nearly as he could tell there was no broken bone, but the knee was swelled and the leg too stiff to bend. Tolliver turned to the watching Cantwine.

"He can't walk. We'll have to rig some kind of a way of dragging him, at least as far as Brady's." He rose and, walking over to the sled, used the ax to knock boards from its side. On these the cook rode, while the others took turns hauling him. They made Brady's the following night, exhausted, with barely enough strength remaining to build a fire in the deserted ranch house.

AFTER supper Tolliver went out to look at the weather. He came back to say that it was clearing. "Someone's got to push on to the Walters's place and get horses. Would you rather go or would you rather stay here with the cook, Ray?"

Ray Cantwine seemed to consider. His long, narrow face was gaunt and haggard. "Charley isn't so well either," he said, indicating his silent brother. "I'll stay with him and the cook. You and Shorty go."

Tolliver looked at Shorty. The tall rider merely nodded. Tolliver said, "We'll leave

at daylight," and turned toward the bunk. He was up and had the fire going a good hour before the sun rose. They made the Patton place by noon and, finding it deserted, paused only to make coffee before pushing on. The wind was down, but the sky above their head was again leaden, promising more snow.

Dogs greeted their arrival at the Walters yard, as they turned in through the gate shortly after dark. The door came open, emitting yellow light. Walters's hoarse voice demanded to know who it was.

As they stepped in Walters stared at them dully, and Tolliver realized that for some reason the man had lost all his bluster. "I never expected to see you again, Owen."

Tolliver was surprised. "Why not?"

The man's voice was weary. "No one could have lived through those ice storms."

"We were at the reservation."

"You mean you got the herd through?" Walters was incredulous.

"But of course."

The man's heavy shoulders sagged. "I wish I'd sent my cattle with you. I wish I'd done anything with them, anything. Five days it blew. A man couldn't get out of the house, he couldn't find his way to the barn. The cattle drifted before the wind, some of them clear to the east rim. They're dead, all of them. We're ruined." The thought of it was too much for him. He sank down in the chair beside the stove and buried his face in his hands. "The whole valley is wiped out. I don't think that there are a hundred head left alive in the whole section."

Tolliver and Shorty stared at each other in appalled silence.

THE town of Benton was stunned by the ice storms. For days they raged, crusting the whole valley in a cocoon of ice which was inches deep. It cleared, then snowed again, and the thermometer went to ten below, then twenty, then twenty-five. It was the coldest weather anyone could remember. When the storm finally ceased the sun came out to sparkle on the ice, to sparkle on a world which had been claimed by death.

Men rode through the bitter weather, searching for drifted stock. They found the cattle all along the ridge of the eastern rim, where they had moved before the driving wind—some standing, some buried in drifts, all dead.

The country was paralyzed. No one could think of anything except the staggering loss. The wealth of the valley was gone. Herds which the owners had struggled years to build had been wiped out.

Bryan Hall drove Martha Martel out to the Box M in his cutter. Grace Perkins watched them leave town and watched again as they drove in after dark and came to the restaurant to eat.

She knew from Martha's face what the news was, but she asked anyway. Martha said in a dead voice, "All gone. There isn't a living head on the Box M. Even the horses drifted."

Grace said, "But what happened to Owen and the men with him? If they were caught in the open by this storm. . . ."

Both Bryan and Martha stared at her, and Martha said, shortly, "If Owen had stayed at home where he belongs he might have managed to save some of our stock." Her tone was flat, final, and Grace moved away, knowing that they would not send out a search party to hunt for Tolliver. The town believed him dead, but in her heart she refused to give up hope.

It was three days later when Shorty rode his weary horse into the livery and walked on his stiffened legs to come into the restaurant.

The news of his arrival spread across town like wildfire, for he had told the hostler that the full crew was safe and that they had delivered the cattle to the Indians.

Grace looked at him when he entered the restaurant, hardly daring to believe her eyes. "Weren't you with Owen Tolliver?"

He nodded, sinking tiredly onto a stool.

She hesitated over the next question. "Is he safe?"

Shorty told the story then, how the cook was hurt, how the Cantwines had stayed with him while he and Owen had ridden for help. "Owen got a sled at

Walters's and went back after the cook," he explained. "I'm to get the doctor and take him out to the Walters place." He broke off, for the restaurant door had opened and Martha Martel came in, followed by Bryan Hall. She walked directly to the counter, taking the seat next to Shorty.

"You should have come to tell me at once."

He looked at her with weary eyes. "I was coming, as soon as I got some coffee."

"The cattle," she said. "What happened to the herd? Are they safe?"

"On the reservation. The Indians came down and got them through the Cut. We lost a few, not many."

SHE took a deep breath, like a person who had been drowning and suddenly finds herself free of the dangerous water. "And the money? The agent paid Owen, didn't he?"

Shorty had his mouth full. He nodded. "It's safe with the Cantwines and the cook at Brady's. It was too heavy to bring on to Walters. We travelled as light as we could. Owen will bring it down on the sled."

Martha Martel had known Shorty for years and had never paid any attention to him. At the moment he was dirty and bearded and unkempt, but she leaned over and kissed him impulsively. "You're a darling," she told the startled rider. "I love you. I love all of you."

The room behind her had been gradually filling with curious townsmen. Someone laughed. Someone started a cheer. For an instant they forgot that all the cattle in the valley were dead, that they had lost everything, that the money which Tolliver had received for the Box M herd was about the only money they would see for a long time.

The doctor came in to talk with Shorty. The livery hostler was getting the sleigh ready, the crowd broke up, and Martha Martel left, with Bryan Hall trailing her.

Grace said to the doctor suddenly, "I'm going with you."

Both he and Shorty turned to stare at her.

"There's no woman at Walters's," she said. "You'll need somone to help, someone to nurse.".

Shorty made his protest. "It's thirty miles to Walters's, ma'am, it's bitter cold, and the road is bad. I had to get a fresh horse at Hempstead's and another at DeChute's."

She did not listen. She was already talking to her mother, telling her what food to prepare, what things to send. Then she walked out and let the doctor tuck the blankets carefully about her, and they were on the road. The doctor drove the fresh team, and Shorty, rolled in blankets, was asleep in the rear seat.

It was cold, but the sun was blanked by sheltering clouds and there was no glare. They made good time. Still, it was three hours before they reached DeChute's, and the sky in the north grew constantly more ominous.

DeChute wanted them to wait over, but Grace Perkins argued with the doctor until he reluctantly agreed to push on. With a fresh team they started for Hempstead's.

Darkness caught them at Cloud's crossing, and as they came up the steep bank on the far side it was beginning to snow. The doctor urged the team forward. He was a middle-aged man who had spent most of his life in the valley and was used to making long calls in all kinds of weather, but as the snow increased and the wind blew up he was frankly worried.

Shorty was awake, still in the rear seat of the sleigh, grumbling to himself, "If we get off the road we're finished." But they did not get off the road. They came into Hempstead's a little after midnight, so chilled that it was hard for them to walk from the barn across to the house.

THEY were on the road again before daylight. The snow had stopped and they made Walters's by ten o'clock, to find Tolliver had not yet returned with the crippled cook.

They argued, both Walters and the doctor saying that Tolliver had probably been caught in last night's snow and laid over at Patton's.

But Shorty and the girl insisted that they push on north. After much grumbling Walters rode with them. They made the eleven miles to Patton's in four hours, and there was no sign of Tolliver or that he had been there. The sky looked like more snow, and it was another twelve miles to Brady's. Walters suggested that he and Shorty try to get through, while the doctor and the girl wait at Patton's.

Grace looked at him. "We've come this far," she said. "Isn't it a little silly that we all don't go on? Something must have happened to Owen or he would have been back before now. If he's hurt the doctor will be needed there, not here."

They went on. The snow held off, although the wind came up with cruel force. The horses were tired and they did not like the wind. Their speed decreased. It got dark before they had covered half the distance, and it was nearing midnight again when the darker shape of Brady's buildings rose up out of the night.

There was no light, no smell of smoke in the air, and the fresh snow in the yard was untracked. They pulled directly for the house. Walters's hail failed to bring an answer, although it would have awakened the soundest sleeper.

The big rancher got down stiffly and thrust open the door, and they heard him strike a match as the doctor helped Grace from the sleigh. Then Walters reappeared, and his voice was strained as he said, "Don't come in yet."

Grace was quickly at his side, all the fear she had known for hours boiling up in her. "What is it? Is Owen hurt?"

He hesitated for a moment. "The cook is dead," he told her. "There isn't anyone else here."

DRIVING the Walters's sled and leading two saddle horses for the Cantwines, Owen Tolliver turned into the Brady yard. It was long after dark and he was not surprised that no lights showed from the old cabin. But neither was there the smell of wood smoke in the frosty air,

[*Turn page*]

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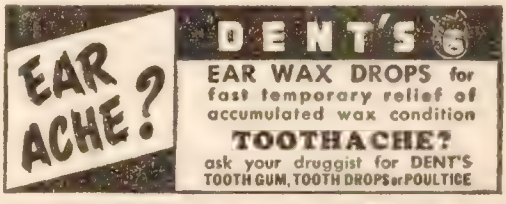
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and he knew a quick unease.

He pulled the tired team close to the house door, and got stiffly down. He thrust the door open, calling Ray Cantwine's name as he did so.

There was no sound from within, and no heat came out through the doorway to greet him. With fingers stiff and claw-like he fumbled in his pocket, found and lit a match, and saw the glint of the lamp chimney in the tiny glow. Moving across, he lifted the chimney and put the dying match against the charred wick.

It was too far gone, and the flame died. He cursed in the sudden darkness, so tired that he felt the effort of finding and lighting a second match was almost beyond his strength.

But somehow he worked his stiff fingers back into his pocket, got a second match, struck it on the table edge, and lighted the lamp. He screwed up the wick and set the chimney in its place before he turned to look at the bare room.

Only then did he see the cook on the floor. Dully he wondered why the man would lie there without even a blanket to protect him from the cold. Then his tired eyes took in the bullet hole, just above the old man's flattened nose, and the stain made by the dried blood where it had run down and hardened across the floor.

For a moment he was motionless. Then his head cleared and he was at once alert, and a sudden, all-consuming anger built up within him as he looked quickly at the rest of the room.

The cook's forty-four was close to the gnarled hand, as if the cook had been drawing it when the shot that killed him came. Aside from the body the room was empty. All but two of the blankets were missing. The food was gone—so was the coffee pot and the small frying pan.

And the gold? It seemed to him that he should have thought of the gold first. He suddenly recalled Ray Cantwine's smile as he had left the gold with the old cook. Ray had said, "Would you be leaving all that gold here with us if it weren't snowing outside, friend Owen?"

Tolliver cursed now under his breath. He had killed the cook by leaving the gold here in the cabin, killed him as certainly as if his own hand had squeezed the trigger.

Mechanically he turned to the stove, laid a fire and lighted it, and then, looking back at the table, saw something which had escaped his attention before. Someone had taken a piece of charcoal from the ashes and scratched a message on the table top. He bent over and read:

> "Sorry, the old fool wasn't reasonable.
> He pulled his gun."

There was no signature, but the words and the silent body made the message very plain. The Cantwines had taken the gold and started to leave. They should have disarmed the old man. Maybe they had not realized he wore the gun tucked into the waistband of his trousers. He had pulled it, trying to save the Box M, and they had left him where he fell.

TOLLIVER stared down at the crude, smeared words, and then stonily he went back into the night, drove the sled to the barn, and stabled the tired team. Afterward he came back into the room, rolled himself in his blankets, and stretched out on the hard bunk.

He was asleep almost at once. Years of training and utter exhaustion combined to wipe his problems from his mind, but that same training roused him before daylight.

The fire had gone out and the stove was nearly cold. He rebuilt it, went out and got food from the sled, and cooked breakfast without even glancing toward the cook's body.

Afterward he picked the best of the lead horses and saddled it, fastening a small package of food behind the saddle. He had no rifle and wished for one, but wishing could not produce it. He mounted and rode out, following the tracks which the Cantwines' snowshoes had made as the brothers had headed southeast, ignoring the road.

The tracks were drifted slightly, but they were still clearly visible and easy to

follow, since it had not snowed since their departure. He rode steadily, grimly, through the morning, thankful that the ice crust beneath its six-inch snow cushion was strong enough to support his horse.

He made good time, pressing the animal now, for from the direction of the tracks he guessed that the men he followed were headed for Terrill's place below the east rim. Just before noon he came into Terrill's yard, and saw the house door open. At once he was alert, the short gun in his hand.

But it was only Terrill, followed by his wife, who came out to stare at him from the low porch. He called, "Seen Ray Cantwine?"

Terrill swore in deep anger. "They stayed the night here, the thieving robbers. They walked in with a wild story that you were sick, that the rest of the crew had stayed at the reservation and that they had come out on snowshoes to get help. We believed them. We fed them and gave them our own bed, since they were near worn out. Then this morning they robbed us. They took my three horses and my rifle and what food they wanted. As they rode away they called back that if you came I was to tell you that you would never catch them because they were heading over the east rim for Aspen, and they'd be in Mexico if you wanted to look them up later."

Tolliver listened in silence, his eyes scanning the distant snowy hills. "Did they take the snowshoes with them?"

"They did," said Terrill. "I guess they mean to ride as far as they can into the hills and then go on on foot. Why are they running from you, Owen?"

"For thirty pounds of gold," Tolliver said. "Some men will take a lot of risk for that much money." He got down then and came into the two-roomed house.

WITHOUT those horses I'm afoot," Terrill told him. "Otherwise I'd ride along. I'd like nothing better than a crack at those crawling thieves.

[*Turn page*]

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How did they manage to get away with the gold?"

Tolliver told him what had happened, how he had found the old cook dead on the cabin floor. "You haven't a rifle to spare, have you?"

"I haven't. They even walked off with my short gun, damn them, and all my shells. But it's the loss of the horses that puts us in a spot. I was going to take the woman into town a soon as the roads are fit. No use staying here. The ice storm killed all our stock."

Tolliver had a second cup of coffee before he rode away. The Cantwine tracks led onward toward the eastern hills. Maybe the brothers did plan to cross the mountains to Aspen, but he was not sure. Ray, he thought, was a shrewd and careful man, and Ray must have planned to steal the gold as soon as he heard of the plan to make the drive to the reservation. This explained many things which had been puzzling Tolliver. It explained why Cantwine had refused the return of his twenty cows when the other ranchers had taken back their stock. It explained why he had been so willing to volunteer to accompany the herd while all the other men in the valley had refused. It explained why he had stayed on, even after Porine had quit.

Ray Cantwine had been gambling. He had gambled that somehow Tolliver would get the herd through, and that once the cattle had been delivered and paid for there would be an opportunity to steal the gold and escape from the country.

And things could not have worked out better for Cantwine. He and his brother had nearly a full day's start. They had fresh horses and food and a rifle, and they knew the broken ground of the eastern hills as few men did. But were they really meaning to leave the valley to the east, or did they have some other plan?

He studied the sky, noting the clouds banking again in the north. A fresh snow would blot out the Cantwines' tracks very quickly. What he needed was help, a posse of the whole valley for the hunt. He needed to dispatch riders to each of the towns along the railroad, if he meant to head them off. His best move was not to keep on following the tracks, but to head directly toward Benton and more help.

The easiest way out of the valley during the winter months was south along the stage road which lead out through Daylight Pass to Cap Rock, on the main line of the Pacific Railroad. There was also a road to the east, and the Cantwines might manage to get through its drifts on snowshoes, but certainly not if they kept their horses. Another road lead westward past the Walters place and on over the mountain wall to Dorchester. This too would be filled with snow, and there was no railroad, but the main stage line ran through Dorchester, connecting with the trains at Mountain Springs.

BUT if the Cantwines were going south or west, why did they continue heading directly east? Perhaps they meant to reach the hills and turn south, following the bench behind their own ranch, behind Grover's and the Box M, until they had made a half circle around the valley, bypassing Benton to reach the main trail close to the mouth of the southern pass.

He debated. They would need to avoid all of the bigger ranches, and would have to travel a good twenty or thirty miles out of their way. He could follow their curving tracks, or he could cut directly southwest toward town, pick up what riders he could find, and fan out in an effort to cut off their escape.

He made his choice. If he guessed wrong, if the Cantwines were actually planning to attempt the eastern pass, he would lose them altogether. But it was worth a gamble.

As it was he was a good half day behind them, he had no snowshoes, and it was going to storm again. In the storm he was bound to lose the tracks long before he caught up with the fleeing men.

He turned and rode south, heading directly for Benton. In the late afternoon he was directly east of the Walters ranch and he angled across, meaning to strike the main road somewhere between Walters's place and Hempstead's. It had begun to

snow, and it would soon be dark. He felt that he had lost his men entirely, and that if he did not reach the main road before full night he might well be lost himself.

And then he struck the tracks of two riders and swung down to examine them in the fading light, his excitement growing. The tracks were sharp and clear, and with hardly any fresh snow over them.

He stood for a long moment, staring first at the marks of passage and then into the west, where the flying snow obliterated the shadow of the mountains.

The tracks came out of the east, directly behind him, and headed toward the pass behind Walters's ranch. He felt certain that they had been made by the fleeing Cantwines.

The hunch rode him as he swung back up into the saddle. There would be few stray riders out in this weather, and there was no ranchhouse in the direction from which the tracks had come. And they were heading straight west, not swerving north as they naturally would have done had they been heading for Walters, or south if they had been making for the Hempstead place.

He pressed forward, certain now that luck had played into his hands, for if he had stayed with their tracks as they circled along the western hills the storm would have blotted them out long since.

Now he was less than an hour behind, and as he pressed forward his conviction grew that this was indeed the trail of the men he sought. It crossed the main north-south road almost half way between the Walters and Hempstead places and continued west, picking up a side road which branched off toward Walters's summer line camp and the pass beyond. No valley rider would have any reason to ride this trail at this time of year. The west pass was not open and the line camp not in use.

But the side trail helped, for Tolliver pushed ahead with renewed confidence, no longer struggling to make out the Cantwine tracks which the snow and darkness almost hid.

[*Turn page*]

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IT DID not enter his head to turn back to one of the ranches for possible help. Time was important now. If he could catch the brothers before they abandoned their horses and pushed on up through the pass on snowshoes, it was all he asked. He also felt that he had the advantage of surprise. The Cantwines would not expect him to be so close behind them. They would think that he was probably still following their tracks along the eastern hills.

The trail wound into the bottom of a shallow gully, and the wind was now directly at his back. He had lost all conception of passing time. He was chilled to the bone and both of his hands were numb. He wondered how much longer he could manage to stay in the saddle, how much further ahead his quarry was. Then, through the curtain of the sifting snow, he saw the gleam of light.

He thought that his weary eyes were playing him tricks, and then the light showed again. He realized that he was approaching the Walters's summer line camp, that the Cantwines must have paused to rest, to take shelter from the storm.

He rode his tired horse forward at a walk. The snow blotted the light again, and yet again, until he was within a hundred yards of the crude building.

He saw the lean-to beside the shack, and guessed that the Cantwines had sheltered their animals within and circled to come up wind, so that the stabled animals might not scent his mount and give a nickered warning.

He dismounted beside the line of a ruined corral and tied his animal to one of the ancient posts, flexed his hands to try to bring back their circulation, and then removed his right glove and drew his gun.

He moved forward. The shack was old and weather-beaten and Walters did not trouble to keep it in repair. The single window was broken; someone had stretched a blanket to keep out the cold and snow, but light came through the chinks between the ill-set logs. He came close to the wall to peer through one of these cracks.

Charley Cantwine was beyond the stove, sitting on a box-like chair, while Ray got supper on the rusted stove. The smell of boiling coffee and frying meat reached Tolliver and made him weak, sending a sharp, knife-keen pain through the pit of his empty belly.

For a moment he was forced to press his gloved hand against the rough wall for support. Then he looked again to make certain that both Cantwines had their backs to the door. Reassured, he made his careful way around the corner of the building.

There was a wooden latch. He lifted it gently with his left hand, still gloved. His right was bare, gripping the cold metal of the gun. Then he thrust the door inward, stepping through the opening, saying in a voice that had a cracked sound even in his own ears,

"Don't move, either of you."

BRYAN HALL watched the doctor and Grace Perkins drive out of Benton, then turned away from the bank window feeling angry and dissatisfied. Looking up to find Gilbert North, the teller, watching him, he spoke sharply to the man without remembering exactly what he said.

Afterward he moved back to his desk and sank heavily into the chair. For long moments he sat motionless, his shoulders hunched, his big body utterly slack. Anyone watching might have assumed that he was asleep with his eyes open, but Byran Hall had never been more alert.

His active mind was trying to readjust his position to the current happenings, and he did not find the picture pleasing. Until the killing ice storm had wiped out most of the valley cattle, the future had seemed very bright. But in a few tragic days everything that so many had worked for had been swept away.

Hall had no way of knowing how wide a territory had been struck by the storm. He did not realize that the condition, instead of being local, affected the entire northwestern portion of the country, covering the great plains to the Rockies. This, in fact, was the year of the "Big Die." That was the way men later referred to it. Nearly every rancher north of Texas had been wiped out. It was a blow from which

the cattle business never actually recovered.

No other winter storm in history was so widespread, none had lasted longer, nor came with more violence. It had howled down from the north, bringing its recurrent snows, which continued to fall intermittently for over forty days, and it was then capped by the worst ice storm the frontier had ever known.

On the open plains cattle had drifted before its screaming fury until they starved or until they froze to death, caught against some drift fence or some line of rocky hills. The cold had been excessive, almost unbelievable.

The valley itself did not suffer to the same extent as did the ranchers on the unbroken plains, for the circling mountains had given a degree of protection. But they had suffered enough. The results were nationwide. There were bank failures and hardship cases clear across the land.

But Bryan Hall neither knew nor cared about the rest of the country. His interest was centered in the valley, and his mind was wrestling with the problem of how best to turn the situation to his own advantage.

He analyzed the situation as carefully as he could. The bank was in precarious shape. It was a small business to begin with, the total capital being only thirty thousand dollars; and while the deposits were near the twenty-thousand mark, making total assets of fifty thousand, the outstanding loans were ten thousand dollars above that.

The seeming difference had been made up by discounting the mortgages they held with the Territorial Land Bank at Cap Rock. They had borrowed mony from Burton Glass at six percent and reloaned it to the valley ranchers at seven, taking chattle mortgages against the beef herds, to be paid after the next fall roundup.

NOW the cattle were dead, the security worthless. Bryan Hall knew that the chances were very good that the Land Bank would call their loans.

[*Turn page*]

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Something had to be done, but if this were handled properly it could be turned to his own advantage. Owen Tolliver had made that possible. He smiled coldly at the thought. If Tolliver had not gotten through to the reservation with the Box M herd, had not sold it for eight thousand in gold, the situation would be nearly irretrievable.

But the gold which Tolliver was bringing south might save the bank, and if well used might put Bryan Hall in control of the whole valley.

He rose and got his coat, told the teller he would be gone an hour, and then stepped from the bank to move along the snow-filled street to the hotel. He passed no one on the sidewalk. It was bitter cold, and the town was huddled behind the shelter of its frosted windows.

He came into the lobby and, finding it deserted, hesitated a moment, then climbed the stairs and moved along the upper hall to Martha Martel's door.

He knocked, and heard the girl stir within. She called out, asking who it was. He told her, and there was a marked pause before the door opened and she was facing him.

"I've got to talk to you. It's tremendously important." He kept his voice low. There might be someone in the adjoining room, and the building's walls were thin.

She hesitated. "I'll meet you in the lobby in five minutes.

That did not please him. He would have preferred to talk with her in the privacy of her room, but he knew her well enough not to argue.

"It's this way," he said when they were finally seated in the corner of the empty lobby. "The valley lost ninety per cent of its cattle in the recent storm. The small outfits fared better than the larger ones because they only had a few head to look after. In some cases they even brought their calves into the houses."

She looked at him wordlessly, and he went on. "You were lucky, although you lost your breeding stock and calves. Tolliver got most of your beef animals over the pass and got paid for them."

Still she did not speak. She had her father's ability to listen, to make the other person take the lead. It irritated Bryan Hall that her expression was so hard to read, that it was difficult to guess what she was thinking. A little of this irritation crept into his voice when he added.

"So, because Owen Tolliver is a stubborn fool, because he practically stole your herd, you come out in comfortable circumstances while the rest of the valley is ruined."

She nodded, and he said, almost harshly, "Can't you talk? Haven't you anything to say?"

"What do you want me to say?" She was unhurried, probing him with her eyes. "You came here to talk to me. I'm waiting to find out what is on your mind."

"Can't you guess?" He was reluctant to express his plan until she gave him some lead.

"I don't like guessing." Her words were crisp. "What do you want, Bryan? What do you hope to gain?"

"What makes you think that I hope to gain anything?"

She smiled faintly, without mirth. "I know you rather well, Bryan."

"Do you?" This was not exactly the opening he had been hoping for, but he realized that it would have to do.

"I think I do. You have always managed to keep your eye on the main chance. I think the reason I decided not to marry you is that in a great many ways you and I are much alike, so alike that I would not risk it. One famliy cannot stand two leaders.

FOR the moment he accepted this without argument. "We are alike. That is the reason I'm here. It's only fair that you be told that there is a good chance that the bank will fail."

She was instantly alert, all pretense of disinterest gone. "Fail?"

He nodded. "We owe the Territorial Land Bank at Cap Rock about twenty-five thousand dollars. We discounted that much paper with them and put up cattle mortgages that we hold as security. Since

the cattle are now dead, and the mortgages therefore worthless, the Land Bank will probably call our loan."

"But?"

He shrugged. "If the bank fails the holders of the capital stock under the law are liable for a dollar assessment for every dollar's worth of stock they hold. You are the majority stockholder. It would wipe out all your deposit and most of the eight thousand Owen Tolliver is so fortunately bringing back to you to pay that assessment."

She was gasping, not quite ready to believe him fully, and yet knowing that he must be telling the truth.

"But what can we do?"

He said, "Several things. Fortunately over half the money on deposit at the bank belongs to the Box M, and you are about the only stockholder in the whole bank who can stand an assessment. Therefore, we first make a deal with Mr. Glass of the Territorial Land Bank. We pay off his loans with what money the bank has on hand. We then get him to take your personal note for the balance of what we owe. I'm sure we can arrange it when he understands that, after the reorganization, you will in effect be the Benton bank."

She did not answer.

"Next we assess all our stockholders. We can take what deposit they have with us as credit against their assessment, which means that we will not be called upon to meet any heavy withdrawals. Those who can't pay, and I can make up a list of them easily, will simply lose their stock, which will revert to the bank. From owning sixty per cent as you do now, your percentage will rise to nearly eighty-five, perhaps nearer ninety. We can probably buy out the remaining stockholders at a very reasonable figure, since after the blizzard they are all short of both cash and cattle. The bank will then belong to you."

She did not try to conceal her bewilderment.

"But if the bank is ruined, what good will it do me to own it?"

[*Turn page*]

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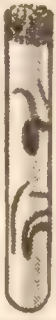

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He smiled at her. He had the heady feeling of being finally appreciated. He said, "But it's not ruined, at least not in the way you mean. When I made those cattle loans, I took secondary mortgages on the ranches themselves and I did not turn the land mortgages over to the Cap Rock bank.

"First we levy on the chattel mortgages, get a deficency judgment because the cattle

are dead, then we foreclose on the ranches. Inside of six months the bank will own three-quarters of the valley, and you will own the bank; therefore, the valley will be yours. With the land as collateral we'll have no difficulty in getting an outside loan to restock the range—or, if we prefer, we can sell the whole place to one of those syndicates of foreign investors who have been buying heavily into the American cattle business."

SHE was staring at him, her busy mind turning over the possibilities which he had outlined. The valley had originally belonged to her father, and she had always resented the fact that he had given a good part of it away. Yes, it would be nice if the Box M filled the valley, if her steers grazed from one mountain range to the other.

She said, slowly, "And just where do you figure yourself in all this, Bryan? What do you expect for your share?"

He did not like the sharpness of her tone, but he told her, "All this will take careful handling by someone who understands banks, and bankers, and money. You need me. It would be far simpler if you married me. Really, I have never stopped loving you."

She dismissed this with a little impatient gesture.

He hid his disappointment. He had waited a long time. He could wait longer. He could so involve her affairs that she would never be able to straighten them out without his help.

He said, "I'm sorry. I chose a poor time to remention my feelings for you. I still love you, no matter how you feel, and my one real desire is to help you. You can decide how much my help is worth. You can decide after the bank and the valley are safely in your grasp."

She said, "Bryan, don't get hypocritical. I told you before that I know you too well. Even now I'll bet I can guess what you are thinking—that you will complicate things to the point that, unless I make a deal you like, you will see that I never get things straightened out."

He was suddenly angry. It was as if this girl could read his innermost thoughts. He felt suddenly that he hated her, but he controlled himself.

He said with painful clearness, "What does that mean?"

"That I don't trust you," she said. "You have a devious mind, Bryan. The first thing you thought of after the storm hit was how to turn the situation to your own advantage."

He let some of his feelings show as he sneered. "Don't try to make me believe you are feeling sorry for your neighbors who had their cows winter-killed. The only thing in this world that ever interested you was taking care of yourself."

She nodded. "That's right." Her tone was as hard as his.

"Then why criticize me?"

"I'm not criticizing you. I'm merely saying that I never intend to give you the chance to do to me what you are planning that we will do to others."

He lost the rest of his restraint, saying savagely, "So you intend to use my plan to take the valley and freeze me out entirely?"

"I'm not certain what I intend to do. I may even keep you at the bank, and give you the chance to make something for yourself. But if I do, I'll watch every move you make."

For a moment his anger was so great that he could not speak. Then he mastered

it and told her, "You are Joe John's daughter and things have come easy for you, but that doesn't mean that you are necessarily very smart. It doesn't mean that without me you can take over the valley. I'll warn you now that unless I'm included I'll see that you don't."

She was watching him, apparently unaffected by his tirade. "And just how can you stop me?"

"Several ways," he said. "Public opinion for one thing. Supposing I tell the ranchers what you are planning to do? They might not lynch you, since you are a woman, but again they might. A lot of them aren't normal now. They are pretty badly upset by the loss of their cattle, and if they thought you were going to take their ranches I'd hate to think what they might do."

She smiled thinly. "I don't think you will tell them."

"And why not?"

"Because I'd merely tell them that the plan was yours, and that when I refused to agree you tried to revenge yourself by accusing me. I think they'd believe me, Bryan. They are feeling pretty sold out because they did not send some of their cows on the drive with Owen, and they have not forgotten that you are the person who advised them against it."

He stared at her. "You were against the drive."

"Was I? How many of the ranchers know that I was? Don't forget that it was my herd which was driven north, and don't forget that it is my eight thousand dollars which Owen is bringing home. You will not help yourself, Bryan, speaking against Owen or against me. If I were in your place I'd keep my head low and my voice down until the valley has a chance to forget how very wrong you have been."

She turned then, and moved away from him to climb the stairs, not looking back. He stayed where he was until she disappeared, then quietly he turned and left the lobby, his face blank, drained of everything, including hope.

(To be concluded in the next issue)

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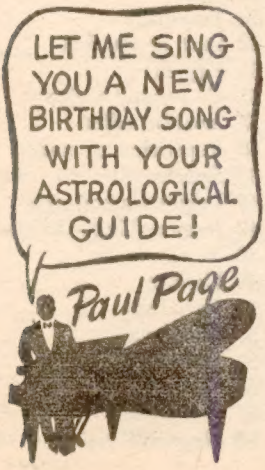

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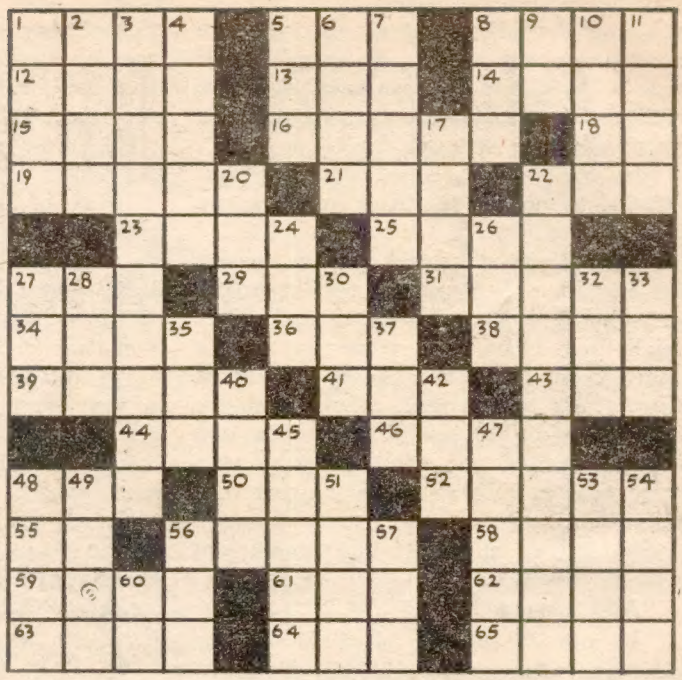


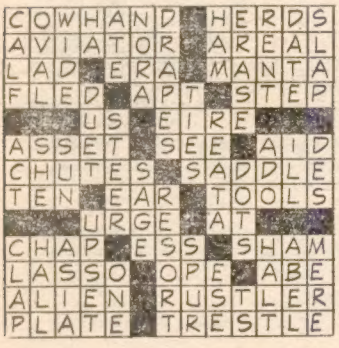
The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1 Recedes, as tides
5 Everyone
8 Would-be cowboy
12 Tense
13 Fish eggs
14 On the sea
15 Slab of baked clay
16 Bunch of horses
18 Because
19 Bowling place
21 To perish
22 To sob
23 To haul
25 Broad belt
27 Oklahoma Indian
29 Silent
31 Awkward fellows
34 Pieces of timber
36 Seize (slang)
38 Native of Scotland
39 Motherless calf
41 The ——— Grande
43 Lock opener
44 To engrave with acid
46 Quick on the ———
48 Automobile
50 Garden tool
52 Cutting part of knife
55 Belonging to
56 Broad arroyo
58 Old
59 Miss Turner, actress
61 Moisture on plants
62 Mildew
63 Horse's gait
64 Girl's name
65 Solely

DOWN

1 Girl's name
2 To dip water from
3 Steer wrestler
4 Beef animal
5 Curved line
6 Burden
7 Blue denim trousers
8 24 hours
9 You and me
10 Darling
11 Not difficult
17 Calf meat
20 Sweet potato
22 Ranch wagon for provisions (2 wds.)
24 Six-shooter
26 Distress signal
27 Not young
28 Also
30 To deface
32 Part of the foot
33 Pigpen
35 To occupy a chair
37 Auction offer
40 Repetition of sound
42 Sphere
45 Lariat's metal eye
47 Famous Texas Mission
48 Young horse
49 Distant
51 Paradise
53 Small valley
54 Whirlpool
56 Stetson
57 To possess
60 Negative reply



Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

—Continued from back cover

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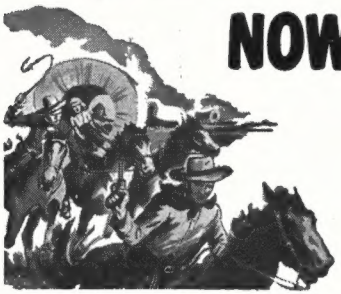

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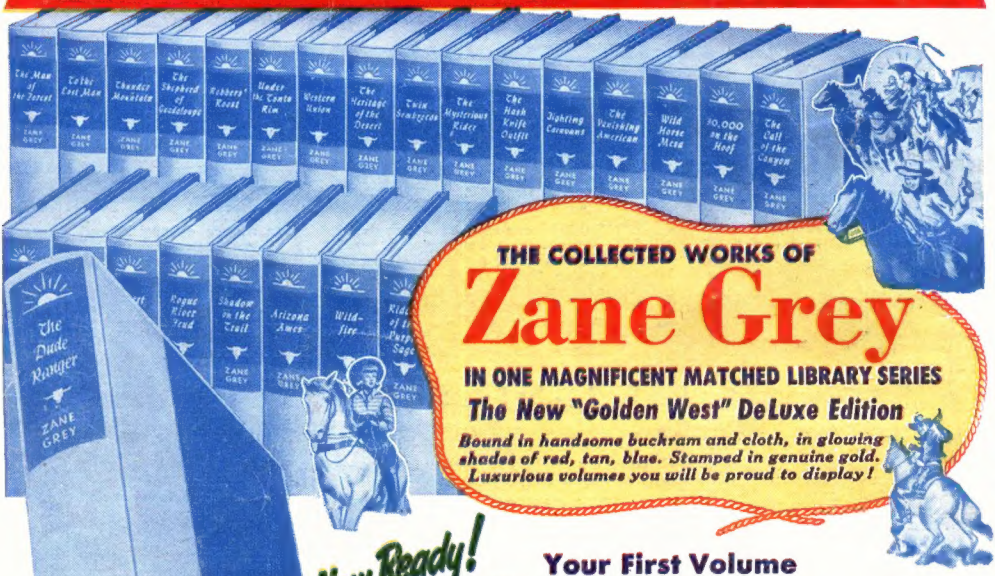

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